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by Janet O'Daniel

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Our stories this month are as changeable in their moods as spring weather—at last, thank goodness, at hand. Stephen Wasylyk's "Not a Day To Die" summons up impending summertime and the Fourth of July with its ice cream and hot dogs, but Rob Kantner's eerie tale, "The Last Day," snatches us back to frosty winter again—with interludes in the story of baking summer heat. Janet O'Daniel brews up a portentous summer storm in "Western Wind"; Kenneth Gavrell's new Carlos Bannon story, "Dive into Darkness," is set as usual in the pleasant climate of Puerto Rico; but Ennis Duling's "Money on the Snow" takes us deep into a New England winter, and in "After Twenty

Years," this month's Mystery Classic, O. Henry does a masterful job of scene-setting in dark, cold, and wet city streets. And to top everything off, David Braly, in a deftly understated and beautifully handled story, "614 Spruce," brings us spring itself with all its harbingers, eternally surprising in more ways than one.

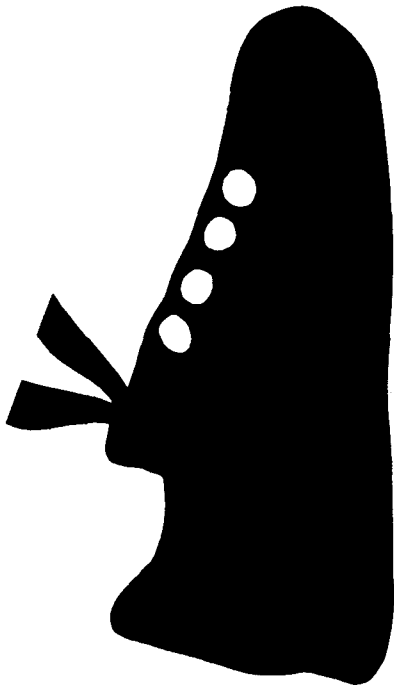
A final note: those of you who read "The Takamoku Joseki" by Sara Paretsky in our January issue will, we're sure, be interested in knowing that her second novel starring female private eye V. I. Warshawski, *Deadlock*, has recently been published by Doubleday (\$14.95). It's "a topnotch mystery," according to *Publishers Weekly*.

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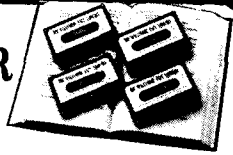
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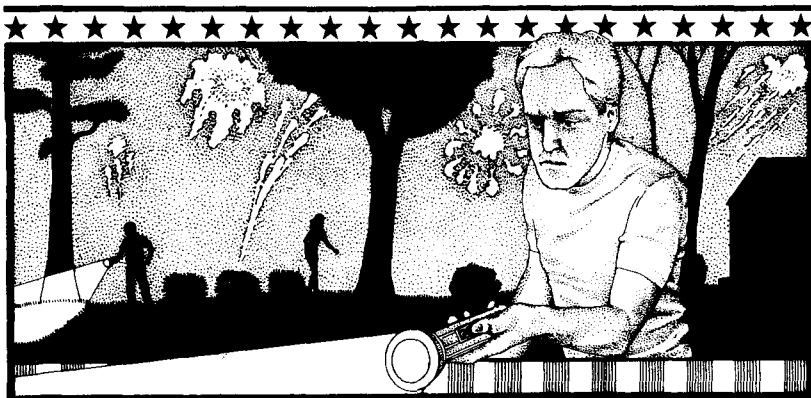
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# Not A Day To Die

by Stephen Wasylyk



**I**ndependence Day. The Fourth of July. How I've loved it since I was a kid and decorated my bike by weaving red, white, and blue crepe paper through the spokes of the wheels, attached streamers to the hand grips, and pedalled gleefully behind the band in the annual parade. Afterward, there was the family cook-out where I could stuff myself with hamburgers and hot dogs without fear of parental reprimand, to be followed, as soon as darkness fell, by the always-spectacular display of fireworks put on by the volunteer fire department.

*Illustration by Glenn Wolff*

For me, no other holiday could surpass it for sheer excitement. I had never outgrown that excitement and had looked forward to it all week. My wife and I had joined Courtland and Christie Bell at the river park for the past three years, our favorite spot at the fringe of the festivities where there was less of a crowd and a lot more freedom from the children running around and the pervasive cries of the food vendors, and well away from the bunting-draped rostrum where the local politicians declaimed their devotion to the cause of freedom, which

in their case meant slurping at the public trough without hindrance or limitation. Not that anyone minded. To listen to the high-flying rhetoric of a commissioner everyone knew had his hand in the till and his relatives on the public payroll was more amusing than the routine of many a famous comedian.

We set up our chairs and grill close to the river bank, just off the gravelled path edged with stones that had been a civic project by the local Boy Scout group, fired up the grill, put the beer on ice, and settled down to talk; the only jarring note a group of teenagers who had taken over a section of the wide, grassy expanse that separated the path from the road where we'd parked our cars.

Blaring stereos, too much beer, and burning pot sending up a sweet-smelling haze got to us and the rest of the family crowd after a time, so Courtland flagged down the sheriff, Masland Dunston, and asked that they be removed. Dunston agreed. Even on this day, freedom had its limitations. He hustled them off. Perhaps another sheriff elsewhere would have gotten an argument, but no one ever argued with Dunston. He had his own ways of enforcing the law, many of which would have been frowned upon by the Supreme Court,

but no one had yet seen fit to make a court case of his methods so when he asked people to move, they moved.

Not completely without protest, if not to Dunston, then to someone else. The someone else this time was Courtland.

A teenager with muscles bulging beneath a skin-tight T-shirt and a brutal face half hidden behind a scraggly beard came over and towered above us in our lawn chairs.

"You people think you're smart," he said. "Think you can sit here and run the world." He swept a pointed finger across the four of us. "Just be careful after dark."

Courtland and I rose. Neither of us could be called fat and flabby, particularly Courtland, who was as tall as I was, with far more muscle.

"Why wait?" asked Courtland pleasantly.

The kid shook his head. "Not now. I'll pick the time and place when the sheriff isn't around."

"Any time," said Courtland.

The kid's eyes drifted toward the women, his eyes boldly stripping away the shorts and blouses. "There are a lot of ways to get even." He pushed his way between the chairs and joined his friends, already piled into their cars and calling to him.

"As long as you're on your feet, I can do with another hamburger," said my wife.

I grinned. Megan took everything in stride. I had a theory that the way people were built had a great deal to do with how they handled life. Megan came up to my shoulder with a solidly put together five foot six, a square face and a firm jaw, her reddish hair cut short.

I glanced at Christie and wasn't surprised to see her face white.

If Megan was independent and unflappable, Christie was the opposite. She was a small, slight woman with long, dark hair that emphasized her delicate features, one of those people unsure of themselves and easily intimidated, so gentle that she couldn't understand aggressiveness in others, much less violence. I never did understand how she and Courtland had paired up.

As for him, there were times when I didn't like him very much. I felt that a thin veneer covered some sort of flaw and that if someone who stood between him and something he wanted was hanging by his fingertips from a cliff, Courtland would step on his fingers.

Megan laughed when I told her so, which didn't upset me. The relationship was held together by the friendship between the two women. If anything happened to that, Courtland and I would walk away from each other without

a backward glance.

Courtland smiled at Christie and patted her hand. "Don't worry. He's just talking."

The incident didn't diminish our appetites. We finished the food and folded the grill after it had cooled and sat talking of this and that and visiting with passersby as the afternoon wore on. Activity on the river and around us grew as more people entered into the swing of things. In the area vacated by the teenagers, an impromptu softball game began among the kids and grownups, endangering the windshields of the cars parked along the road.

Courtland seemed to become more and more restless, his eyes flicking occasionally toward the parked cars as though he were anticipating the return of the teenagers the sheriff had moved out.

My wife rose suddenly. "You know what? I have a sudden craving for an ice cream cone, one of those double dippers that drip down the sides and you have to work fast to stay ahead. What do you say, Christie?"

"Good idea," said Courtland enthusiastically. "Go ahead, Christie."

"Maybe an ice cream cone would be nice," said Christie.

"Let me hunt up a vendor," I said.

My wife held up her hand. "No. Christie and I will go."



"But—" I stopped. I had recognized the look. She wanted to be alone with Christie and the ice cream was an excuse.

"I don't suppose you two want something after all that beer," she said.

"You guessed right," I said. "Enjoy yourself but don't wreck the family budget. These vendors charge so much today, they take off the rest of the year."

"You always were a big spender," she said sweetly.

They took off down the path.

As soon as they were out of sight, Courtland leaped to his feet. "Listen, when they get back, it will be almost time for the fireworks, so suppose I put this stuff away." Without waiting for my opinion, he scooped up his insulated chest and two lawn chairs and headed for the parked cars.

I watched him go. It was obvious he didn't want me along, and it was equally obvious something was going on that I knew nothing about.

Since I didn't want the women to return and find both of us gone, I took my injured ego over and joined the softball game, volunteering as the right fielder. From there I could watch the path for their return.

A kid who seemed to be all chest and shoulders laced into a pitch that curved foul, deep among the parked cars. I had no choice but to pursue it.

I tracked it down alongside a battered Chevrolet far down the road at the end of the line, well away from the field. As I picked it up, I heard a woman's voice, sharp and full of passion, coming from a sedan parked several spaces away.

*"You must do it!"*

I swivelled my head, curious to know why she was so insistent and demanding. She was young and blonde and speaking to Courtland, and as I watched, he nodded and they melted into an embrace that would have fitted right into an X-rated movie.

Feeling like a voyeur, I turned away guiltily and broke into a trot, resuming my position after tossing the ball in.

Now I knew damn well what was going on, and I didn't like any of it, even though it was none of my business. If Courtland wanted to fool around, that was his problem, not mine. The way I'd always felt about him, it was no surprise, but Christie was such a nice person I hated to see her get hurt.

A redheaded kid who would undoubtedly grow up to play major league ball ended the inning with an acrobatic spear of a line drive, and instead of going in for my turn at bat, I waved off my teammates and returned to my deck chair to think.

No wonder Courtland ' been so anxious to have

tie go with Megan, and had taken off so abruptly. I'd have felt the same way if I was supposed to meet a young blonde in a parked car.

I wondered what she meant by those words. *You must do it!* Do what?

Megan and Christie came up the path, looking serious, Megan putting the finishing touches on her ice cream cone while Christie talked, which was odd. Usually, it was the other way around.

"Where's Courtland?" said Christie.

"He just left to put the ice chest and the chairs in the car trunk," I lied. "He should be back in a minute."

"I'll see if I can help." She started toward the parked cars.

I caught her arm. "Let me do it. I have to put our stuff away anyway. You and Megan wait here."

I scooped up the chairs and the grill and headed toward our car, hoping that Courtland had the sense to realize he had been gone long enough. I didn't want to make more excuses for him.

I turned from slamming the trunk closed to find him coming up the road.

"Women get back?"

I nodded. "They look like they've had a long talk."

"About what?"

"You might know better than I do."

I reached into the glove box and found my flashlight. It would be completely dark by the time the fireworks ended, and the town budget never did allow for lights in the park.

His eyes uneasily searched my face in the gathering gloom; then he gave a forced little laugh. "Look, you go on. I'll get my flashlight, too. One isn't enough for all of us on the way back."

We'd managed with one before. I felt he was postponing facing Christie.

Christie didn't even wait for me to get close as I approached the women.

"Where's Courtland?" she called.

I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "Getting his flashlight. He'll be along in a minute."

She glanced at Megan, squared her shoulders as if she had decided something, and started across the field. "I'll meet him halfway. You two go on ahead."

"We'll wait for you here," I said.

"No, we won't," said Megan. "We'll meet you at the boat-house, Christie."

Christie nodded.

I let her get out of earshot. "Mind telling me what's going on?"

"Christie's worried. She suspects there is another woman."

She was asking me what to do about it."

"Since when did you become Ann Landers? I hope you kept out of it."

"More or less. I told her she should talk to Courtland before leaping to any conclusions. I guess that's what she intends to do now, so let's give them plenty of opportunity."

"So she isn't sure he's playing with someone else?"

"She says all the signs are there. She may be quiet, but she's not stupid. What do you think?"

I usually didn't keep things from her, but I decided that what I'd seen and heard wasn't going to help the situation one bit.

"You're asking me? I told you a long time ago what I thought of Courtland, but it's really none of our business. They'll have to work it out. Let's start walking."

We headed downriver. The darkness was coming fast. Once I thought I heard something, paused and peered over my shoulder, but saw nothing.

The boathouse from where we watched the fireworks was several hundred yards from the center of the activities and had the advantage of giving a nice, long range view of not only the aerial display but the static ones set up in a field along the river.

The summer darkness was complete by the time we leaned against the boathouse wall.

I glanced at Megan. "How is Christie taking the idea that Courtland is playing around?"

"How do you think she's taking it? Her whole world revolves around him. She isn't about to let him go. What she wants to do is forgive him and take him back."

"Suppose he has other plans, like a divorce?"

"Do you really think Christie would ever give him a divorce?"

I considered it briefly, which was all that was necessary. "No."

I put my arm around Megan and pulled her close as the first skyrocket arched upward and exploded in a shower of brilliant color.

"I just hope Christie can handle it."

"She'll handle it. There's steel under all that softness. She believes in 'till death us do part.' She'll fight for him."

"Would you fight for me?"

"Are you kidding? You're speaking to a woman who gets at least one indecent proposal a day. With you out of the way, I'd have a ball."

I grinned. "They should be here by now. They're missing the fireworks."

"I'm sure they're having plenty of fireworks of their own," she said dryly.



A light flickered to life at one of the static displays, crept upward, and erupted to form an American flag, the colors sharp against the night. It burned brightly, sending up a huge pall of smoke, and then began to die, leaving only a charred framework, a small tongue of flame here and there refusing to die. It reminded me of the romance between Courtland and Christie.

Someone touched my arm. I turned to face Courtland.

"Where's Christie?" he asked.

"She went to meet you."

"I didn't see her. When I got back to the path, you were gone, so I thought she was with you."

It was a hot July night but I felt a chill, even though I told myself that nothing much could have happened to her with so many people around.

"Let's circulate," I said. "She might not have been able to find us in the dark and is here somewhere."

Groups were clustered here and there, some leaning against the boathouse the way we were, others seated on blankets on the grass. It didn't take us long to find that she was with none of them.

"Let's work our way back," I said. "She has to be somewhere between here and the car."

We started up the path. Fifty feet away from the crowd, the night was soft and empty, the

fireworks behind us hissing and aerial bombs thundering in a continuous, rolling pattern of sound.

We walked quickly to the field and cut across, seeing nothing and no one.

"Damn," said Courtland. "Where can she be?"

"Take it easy," I said. "She probably missed you and is wandering around looking for us."

"She has to come back to the car eventually," said Megan. "I'll stay here. You two go back to the crowd. Maybe she went past the boathouse. Maybe she didn't see it in the dark and walked right by."

I knew what Megan was driving at. Christie had been upset. When she missed Courtland, she just could have wanted to be alone. But if she'd felt that way, she could have simply stayed at the car. She certainly wouldn't have been interested in watching the fireworks. Still, we had to look. No one can predict what a person who is upset and not thinking clearly will do, and there was that old saying about misery loving company.

Courtland started off at a fast stride, headed downriver, crossing the field at an angle to save time.

I tried to calculate where we had set up the chairs that afternoon and went in that direc-

tion, playing my light from side to side, not knowing what I was looking for or what I expected to find. I ran into a spot where the turf had been torn up by digging feet, but that might have been from the ball game that afternoon. Still, that cold feeling became colder.

I kept moving, eventually reaching the gravel path. Courtland's light had long disappeared. I was alone in the night. Still playing my light from side to side, I headed toward where the fireworks were still decorating the night sky.

The path was fairly straight, which was more than could be said for the river bank. It curved in and out, sometimes coming within ten feet of the gravel, dropping away abruptly three or four feet to the surface of the water. I don't know what made me do it. A hunch based on that cold feeling, perhaps, but at a point where the bank curved inward sharply, I left the path and directed my light downward.

She lay half in and half out of the water, her upper body below the surface, her bare legs beneath the shorts white in the glaring light.

My knees went weak and a brassy taste filled my mouth before I realized I couldn't leave her like that, that there still might be a chance. I stepped over the edge and slid down,

ending waist deep in the water. Somehow I dragged her up on to the steep weed-covered slope and turned her over. The long dark hair covered her face like tendrils of wet seaweed. I felt for a pulse, found none, and put my ear to her chest, hoping for just a flicker of life, almost crying because it had been at least ten or fifteen minutes since we had first walked up the path headed for the car and maybe if we had found her then, it might have been in time.

I pulled the hair away from her face gently to find a large bruise on her temple, an ugly bruise, wide and discolored, so finding her earlier wouldn't have meant a damned thing at all.

The fireworks continued to hiss and thunder and light up the sky.

*"You must do it!"*

Maybe this was what the woman meant.

Dunston's first thought was that she had strayed from the path in the dark, fallen over the bank, and struck her head. That was the way it appeared in the newspapers and how the talk in the town went. Just another holiday statistic. There was little that Megan and I could do for Courtland. Her family and his took over, and we both felt that our presence

was not exactly welcome. Somehow we'd become responsible, if not completely, then partially.

Maybe we were, and we'd have to live with that. Now there was nothing to do but go about our daily routine and wait for the funeral.

I was having lunch alone three days later in the small restaurant across the street from my office when Dunston came in, looked over the patrons, and spotted me. He slid into the booth.

"Your secretary said you'd be here."

"Can I buy you something?"

"I could do with a sandwich and a cup of coffee. I've been running since seven."

I flagged down the waitress and he ordered.

"I'm sure you didn't come in to have lunch with me," I said. "This place isn't famous for its gourmet menu and I'm not noted as a brilliant conversationalist."

"Maybe not," he said, "but you can bet I'll be listening closely to every word you say. The autopsy report was waiting on my desk this morning."

"So you immediately came looking for me?"

"You first because you're in town, then your wife, and then Courtland. The report says she didn't drown. There was no water in her lungs. She was

dead before she hit the river."

I knew what that meant but asked anyway. "What does that signify?"

"That someone killed her and threw her body in the water."

*You must do it.* The words had haunted me. Now they filled me with a cold horror.

"No," I said. "It couldn't have been that way."

"Yes, it could. You, your wife, and Courtland were with her all afternoon. One of you must have the answer. Tell me again exactly what happened."

The waitress brought his order, and he poured a copious amount of sugar into his coffee and stirred it vigorously, not looking at me at all.

I gave him a rundown of the whole day from the time we unfolded our deck chairs until I found the body, carefully avoiding mentioning the woman with Courtland in the car and what Megan had told me.

"Did you know Courtland was playing around?" he asked casually.

Now I knew why he had been running all morning. He'd reached a conclusion and was looking for information to back it up.

He wouldn't get it from me. I didn't want to believe what my brain was screaming at me, but I couldn't find a way to deny it. It was all there in what I'd read in Courtland a long time



ago and in the woman's voice. I was ninety percent sure Courtland killed Christie, but I just couldn't bring myself to be the prize witness for the prosecution.

"My wife told me that Christie suspected it," I said.

"Then I guess I'll have to talk to her."

"She can only tell you what Christie told her."

"That's what I want to hear."

I pushed the rest of my sandwich aside, my appetite gone.

**H**e took Courtland in for questioning two days later as we were leaving the gravesite after the funeral. It didn't take long for the word to spread. "HELD FOR QUESTIONING" was the headline above Courtland's picture in the paper. Along with him they took the woman, who turned out to be a receptionist in Courtland's office.

I didn't see how the police could prove a thing unless they'd turned up a witness, which was highly unlikely or we'd have heard about one long before. But it really didn't matter. Whether they went on to arrest Courtland and bring him to trial or whether they released him, the harm had been done. I wouldn't be the only one who was convinced Courtland had killed his wife. The only way for that stigma to be removed was

for the sheriff to come up with another suspect, and that wasn't likely, since he wasn't even looking for one. I didn't blame him. Courtland had the motive and the opportunity, and if I, his friend, thought he was guilty, I couldn't blame everyone else for feeling the same way.

Megan held up the paper when I arrived home. "We have to do something about this."

"Why?"

"Because you know Courtland didn't do it."

I looked at her steadily. "Do I?"

Her eyes widened. "You mean you really think—?"

That was when I told her about the woman in the car and what she had said, and when she stared at me, stunned, I reminded her of how I'd always felt about Courtland.

"She could have meant anything," she said desperately. "Maybe she was telling him to insist on a divorce."

"That would have been a waste of time and Courtland knew it, and if he knew it, so did she."

She sank into a chair as though the strength had gone from her legs. "Did you tell the sheriff?"

I shook my head. "I couldn't. I think Courtland killed her but I didn't see him do it, and as long as there is an outside

chance he didn't, I can't be the one who puts the noose around his neck. If I tell them what I heard, neither Courtland nor his lady friend will be able to explain it away, not after what happened. And along with what other evidence they may have, it might be just enough to convince a jury."

"Oh Lord," she said softly. "But you owe something to Christie."

"Don't you think I know that, or haven't you noticed I haven't been eating or sleeping well lately?"

She put her arm around me and held me tight. "I thought—"

"I know. What happened was enough to upset anyone. The last few days haven't been great for you, either."

Her voice was muffled against my chest. "Let's go out somewhere. Take a ride, have dinner. Just try to forget for a few hours."

"I'm with you," I said. "You can even drive."

I rested my head on the back of the car seat and closed my eyes.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Just point the nose of the car and follow it. When you get tired of driving, pick out a restaurant and pull into the parking lot."

I tried to relax. Along with the woman's voice echoing in my brain, there was something

else, something I hadn't even told Megan about. I couldn't get rid of the image of Christie bathed in the bright light of my flashlight after I had pulled her from the water. The glistening white skin of her face and throat was burned into my memory the way a bright light burns its way into a photographic negative. Something about that image was wrong, but I couldn't think of what it might be, other than I was so accustomed to seeing that face bright and alive, my mind couldn't accept the fact that the life was gone from it.

Megan drove, wandering aimlessly, the radio playing softly. It had been one of her better ideas. I felt more relaxed than I'd been in days.

I felt the car slow and turn and come to a stop, and opened my eyes to find she had pulled alongside a small, unpretentious restaurant that we had always intended to visit but never seemed to think of when the time came.

"Not exactly high-class, but I don't feel high-class," she said.

"It's fine," I told her. "At least we shouldn't meet anyone we know."

The hostess ushered us to a table at a window that overlooked an apple orchard, and a young woman came to take our order. She was blonde, with long hair, her face still round

with youth. As she leaned forward to straighten something on the table, a gold medallion dangling from a chain around her neck swung in front of my eyes.

My heart turned over slowly, and I knew why that image of Christie had haunted me. There had been something missing, something small and insignificant and something no one else had noticed because it *was* small and insignificant, crowded out by the magnitude of the tragedy itself. When you came down to it, there were only three people who might have noticed at all. Courtland, Megan, and myself. But Megan had no opportunity to notice, and Courtland had been upset, and if I hadn't seen that glistening image, I would have never noticed, either.

"Excuse me," I said. "That's a very nice medallion you're wearing."

She smiled, pleased, and held it out for me to examine. "I really like it. It's a little different, isn't it?"

The medallion was a flat oval with a scalloped edge, an initial etched into the gold.

"C for Charlotte," she said.

It was a C, all right, but it was more than that. It was really two of them, the smaller tucked within the center of the larger one, both intertwined with forget-me-nots, so that it

could be mistaken for one letter if you didn't know better.

One C for Christie, one C for Courtland. There simply couldn't be two medallions like that. Courtland had ordered it specially from the jeweler, and Christie had worn it everywhere.

It had been missing when I pulled her from the water.

"Where did you get it?" I asked softly.

"My boyfriend gave it to me the other day," she said. "My birthday is July the fifth. Just missed being born on the Fourth of July. My father always says I was very considerate. I gave him an extra day off."

She had turned toward Megan, still holding the medallion out, and I could see recognition drain the blood from Megan's face.

"What's your boyfriend's name?" I asked.

"Tommy," she said. She turned and nodded. "There he is, over there. He works here, too."

The busboy removing the dishes from one of the tables had his back to me. I went up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

He spun. It was the teenager who had made the threat that afternoon after we'd had the sheriff move them out.

"You gave your girl a gold medallion," I said. "Do you want

to tell me where you got it?"

He glanced at the waitress, back at me, and smiled. "Sure. I don't mind. I had the jeweler make it up with her initial."

"There's something you didn't know when you took it," I said. "It isn't one C. It's two. One within the other and the jeweler will have a record. There is only one way you could have gotten it."

With a flick of his wrist, he threw the tray of dirty dishes at me and dived for the door to the kitchen.

I wasn't far behind.

We went through the kitchen, leaving a train of people knocked off their feet and assorted broken crockery. I tackled him in the parking lot, and we both hit a stack of garbage cans. He leaped to his feet, a can lid in his hand like a shield, swinging it at me wildly.

I didn't pay any attention to what he was yelling. It wasn't important. What was important was waiting for him to make a mistake, to swing that lid a little too far, and he finally did and I leaped and caught his wrist and elbow and twisted, throwing him off his feet and to the ground and wrenching his arm up between his shoulder blades.

I could hear the sirens coming. I could always depend on Megan to do the right thing at the right time.

I suppose that if we hadn't gone to that restaurant at that time, I would have remembered the medallion anyway. That expanse of white, gleaming skin was on my mind, and I'd have eventually realized what was missing. Dunston being Dunston, he would have picked the town up, turned it over, and shaken it until the medallion fell out.

As it was, we saved a lot of time and took the pressure off Courtland that much sooner.

In another town, the kid might have sat back and smiled and waited for the prosecutor to prove how he'd obtained the medallion, but people didn't seem to do things like that with Dunston around.

The story the kid told was simple. When Christie had started across the field, there was no one else around. The other people had drifted toward the fireworks display, Megan and I had started down the path, while Courtland, instead of picking up his flashlight and rejoining us, decided to sit in his car and try to think of a way out of the trouble he'd worked his way into.

So there was no one to see the kid stop Christie in the gloom when she was halfway across the field. Someone like Megan, knowing that a scream would bring people running, would have turned him aside with a

few sharp words, but Christie had simply frozen with fear. The kid had originally intended only to harass her, but when he saw how frightened she was, he began to push his advantage. He noticed the initial on the medallion, thought how nice it would be for his girl's birthday the next day, and took it from her. Still not getting any protest, he decided to see just how far he could go. That was when Christie's fear broke and panicked her into running, the kid in pursuit. He tackled her at the path and she fell, striking her head on one of those damned stones. When the kid realized she was dead, he did the first thing that came to mind. He scooped her up and dropped her body into the river.

It was all so unnecessary. If Christie had screamed, if we had waited on the path, if we had turned as we walked, if Courtland hadn't sulked in his car. If— if— you could play the *if* game forever, going all the way back to if a group of people hadn't decided to defy a king and create a new nation, there would have been no holiday and we would have never been there.

The case never went to trial. The kid pleaded guilty to manslaughter and a half dozen lesser charges, and because he had never been in trouble before, he drew a suspended sentence and probation, which caused Dun-

ston to use words that would never find their way into any dictionary, unabridged or otherwise.

On the way home from the office the day after the hearing, I drove to the park, left the car, and stood on the river bank, watching the water flow by. Three twelve-year-olds, shouting at one another, tore by on their bicycles, their voices fading as they headed upriver. Below me, the water curled and eddied silently, and a bird sang in a grove of trees. It was all very peaceful.

I became aware someone was standing alongside me, and I turned to see Courtland, a different Courtland, his eyes shadowed, his face drawn.

"I wanted you to know I'm leaving town," he said.

I said nothing.

"You thought I killed her."

I nodded. "I won't apologize. I saw you in the car with the woman and I heard what she said. There was no mistaking what she meant."

He waited a long time before saying anything. "It was just talk. We were both out of our heads. But you weren't wrong. I did kill her."

I glanced at him sharply. "What is this? Some sort of guilt trip?"

"I wasn't in the car," he said slowly. "I lied. I stood on the road and saw it happen and I



did nothing to help her."

I felt a little sick and my knees turned weak. I knelt and picked at a blade of grass, trying to crush it between my fingers. All I could think of was how easily he could have prevented Christie's death.

I ground the words out. "Damn you!"

"Don't you think I feel the same way?" He passed a shaking hand over his face. "I'd spent the afternoon wishing that Christie would just disappear. I knew she wouldn't let me go and I knew I could never hurt her, so all I had to look forward to was what I already had. Lying and sneaking around. As I reached the edge of the road, there was just enough light to see what was going on. There was a horrible fascination about the whole thing. I stood there frozen. I guess something inside was telling me that if I didn't interfere, the kid would solve my problem. Before I knew it, it was over, and the kid was gone in the darkness. I must have been crazy. I couldn't even bring myself to tell Dunston how it happened. I was so ashamed that if they convicted me for it, that was fine. I was just as responsible as the kid."

"I wish I hadn't found him," I said savagely.

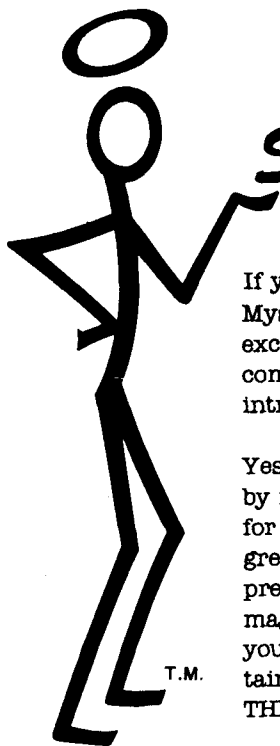
"You would have done me a favor if you hadn't. I finally told Dunston, hoping he'd arrest me for doing nothing, but he says there is no law against standing by and watching a crime being committed, and he was damned if he'd waste his time looking for another to charge me under just to accommodate my conscience. Live with it, he said." His voice broke. "I don't know if I can."

He walked away slowly. I didn't give a damn if he walked into the river. I would have stood there and watched him go.

I knelt, picking at the grass and thinking that next year the Fourth would roll around again. The kids would weave red, white, and blue crepe paper through the spokes of their bicycle wheels and glut themselves at family cook-outs, the high school band would march and play, sometimes a little out of tune. The flags would fly, the politicians would give their wind-blown speeches from the bunting-draped rostrum, and the fireworks display would take place when it became dark.

The way it had always been and the way I had expected it to be forever. Safe and sane. Not a day to die.

Now the Fourth would never be the same again.



## *Memo from Simon Templar...*

If you enjoy the stories in Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* as much as I do, I have some exciting news! **THE SAINT MAGAZINE** is coming back into print with more tales of intrigue and suspense for you to curl up with.

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# *S.T.*

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FICTION

# A Matter Of Pride

by Walter  
Satterthwait

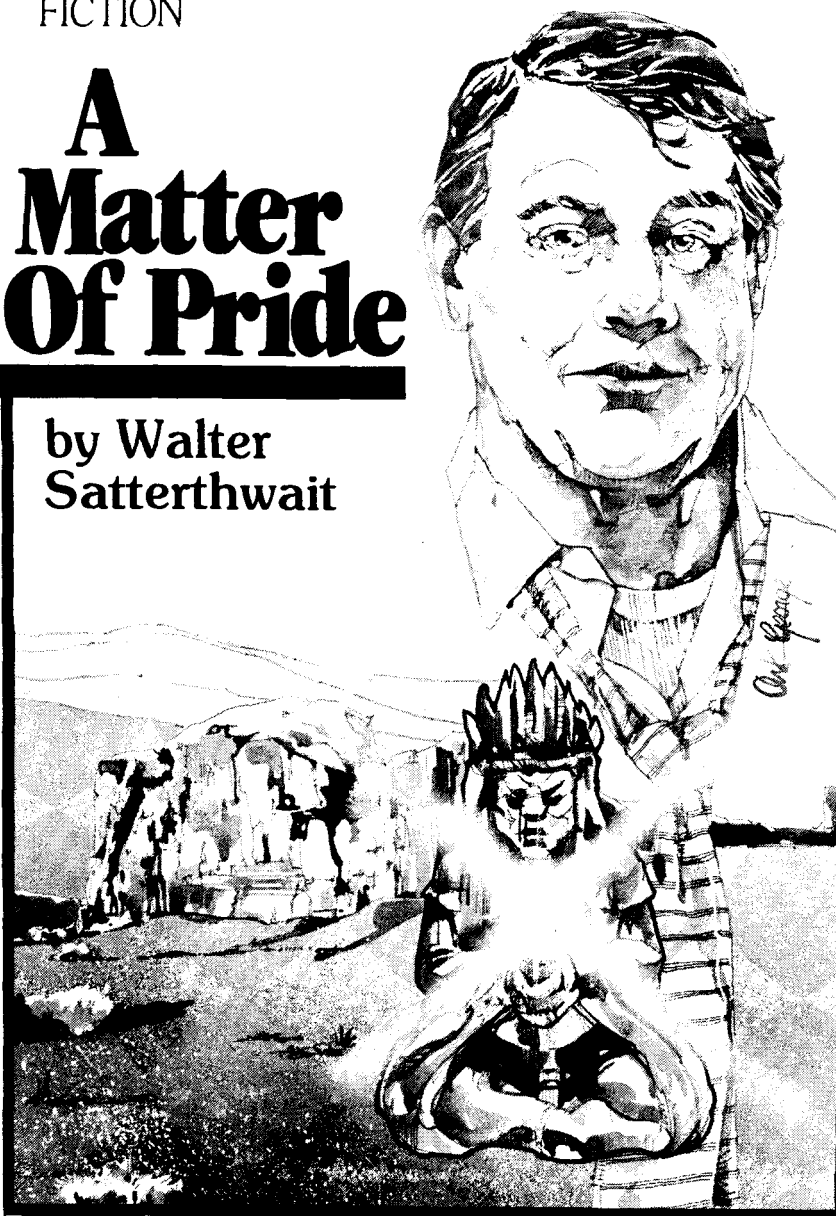


Illustration by Arthur George

**Y**ou know it's going to be a bad day when you wake up, face down, in an alley.

It took Grober a while, however, to realize where he was. When he opened grainy eyes to the muddled light of dawn, his mind was suddenly very busy contending with a truly spectacular interior display: little parachutes of pain were opening at the top of his head and fluttering down through his brain, their canopies trembling against his temples and against his jaws before they landed with a startling thud at the base of his skull.

He pushed himself to his knees, felt suddenly sick, and waited there a moment, breathing deeply through an opened mouth. Then, slowly, he sat down in the dirt. He looked around him.

A battered green dumpster; a narrow wooden gate, closed; brown adobe walls on either side. He recognized the place: the alley behind the Purple Hogan, the Santa Fe bar to which, last night, he had tailed Hubbard Baylor.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. A big mistake—the parachutes became packing crates. Teeth grinding, he reached up and felt, gently, the top of his head. And found a long narrow lump, tender and aflame.

This was all beginning to

make a kind of dreadful sense. With the chill of certain and irrevocable disaster settling over him, he moved his hand to his back pocket, pushed aside his blue windbreaker, and felt for his wallet. . . .

**D**anny was sitting back in his office chair reading a copy of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, his snakeskin boots perched atop his desk. He was wearing fawn-colored slacks, a pale blue shirt, a bolo tie, and a suede sport coat that looked soft enough to spread on bread. Danny dressed exactly like what he was, a Western Lawman: in his case, a lieutenant in the Violent Crimes Unit of the Santa Fe Police Department. No one could have guessed that he, like Grober, had been born and raised in New York City.

"I see by your outfit," said Grober, "that you are a cowboy."

Glancing up from the magazine, Danny said, "You look terrific."

"Thanks," Grober said, closing the door to the squad room.

"You're losing about a pint of blood through each eye."

"I had a rough night. Mind if I sit down?"

Danny shrugged. "The chair belongs to the city. Who am I to say no?" As Grober sat, Danny said, "Instead of drinking, you ever considered just sticking

your thumbs into your eyeballs when you get up in the morning? Save you a lot of money on bar bills and give you the same effect."

"I wasn't drinking," Grober said, stretching the truth a bit for drama's sake. "I was sapped and rolled last night."

"Oh yeah?" said Danny, looking down, turning a page of the magazine. "Some twelve-year-old runaway take a dislike to you?"

"It happened here in Santa Fe. You want to hear about it or not?"

Danny studied the magazine. "Sergeant Martinez, outside, can fill out the report."

"Sergeant Martinez isn't my brother."

"No," Danny said, flipping another page. "No such luck."

Grober waited. Finally, Danny sighed. He closed the magazine, tossed it to his desk top, and swung his legs to the floor. "Where'd it happen?"

"The Purple Hogan."

Danny raised an eyebrow. "Pretty upscale place for a mugging."

"In the alley, outside."

Danny nodded. "That sounds more like your style. What time?"

"Around one this morning."

"See the perp?"

"Perp," Grober said. "Nifty. That's police talk, right?"

"Yes or no."

"No."

"Rolled, you said. What'd they get?"

"Everything. Wallet, car keys. My gun."

"That stupid little Baur? You haven't got a permit for that thing, Phil."

"I don't need a permit in New Mexico."

"Only if the weapon is in plain sight."

"I had it Scotch-taped to my forehead. Look, Danny, I'm not in a wonderful mood this morning. I've got a knot on my skull the size of a beef burrito, I've been robbed, they got all my money, they got my car—"

"Your car?"

"—so I'm not really ready to hear you read statutes at me. Yeah, my car."

"Where was it parked?"

"In the lot around the corner."

"How'd they know which car would fit the keys they stole?"

"I don't know. I've been wondering about it myself." He shrugged. "Maybe they tried the keys on every car in the lot until they came to mine."

Danny frowned. "That doesn't play too well. How'd they know the car was in the lot?"

"I don't know."

"Someone bops a guy, rolls him, he's not going to hang around diddling with a bunch of cars."

"I said I don't know."

"Were you working?"

"Yeah. Tailing a guy."



"What guy?"

Grober shook his head. "He didn't do it."

"The name."

Grober smiled. "Or what? Rubber hose time, Danny?"

Danny made a face. "You've got some nerve, Phil. You come in here, you want special attention, Sergeant Martinez isn't good enough for you, but I ask you for a little simple cooperation and you clam up on me."

"I give you the guy, I blow the investigation."

"Investigation?" Danny snorted; he was good at snorting. "Who're you, Philo Vance? Some wife wants eight-by-tens of her husband and the chippy he's been jumping, so she can shaft him in court. That's an investigation?"

"One thing you could do, you know. I mean, I can see you're busy and all, but you *could* put my car on the list before some booster's mechanic hacks it up and carts it to Juarez."

Danny laughed. "Yeah. Yeah, right, Phil. There's this terrifically hot market for '72 Pintos in Mexico."

Grober nodded. "I'm glad I could bring a little fun into your life, Danny."

"They're a real prestige item down there. Especially the kind like yours, with that classy coat hanger antenna. Executive-style."

"Maybe you were right. Maybe I should've talked to

Sergeant Martinez."

"I think he's already got a Pinto," Danny said, and laughed again.

The telephone on Danny's desk rang. Still grinning, Danny leaned forward and picked up the receiver. "Lieutenant Grober," he said, sitting back in his chair. "Yeah . . . yeah . . . Is that right?" He looked quickly up at Grober. "Yeah, I know where—right here in my office. Thanks, Ed. Appreciate it."

He hung up. "That was Sergeant Munsen," he said. "A couple of uniforms found your car. The DMV got your name from the tags."

Surprised, Grober said, "Where was it?"

"A few blocks from the Purple Hogan. Some kid spotted it and told his mother."

"His mother? Why? Is the car okay?"

"It's not the car so much. It's what was inside."

Grober felt a flutter of unease.

"What was that?"

"A stiff. Shot twice in the forehead. A Baur .25 was on the passenger's seat. According to his papers, it was a guy named Baylor. Ring any bells?"

"Oh great," Grober said, slumping back in his chair. "That is just peachy."

"Wouldn't be the guy you were tailing, would it?"

Grober's headache had returned. He rubbed his temples with his fingertips.

"Just peachy."

"Maybe you better tell me about this case of yours."

Grober nodded. "Maybe I better."

She had come into Grober's office yesterday, tall and dark, capped with a helmet of black hair, full breasted but lean as a whippet. She was wearing leather sandals, a flouncy ruffled peasant skirt, several pounds of Navaho silver, and a Danskin top so tight that one good deep breath would have given her thread poisoning. Right hand wielding a brown cigarette, left resting atop the large brown leather bag slung from her shoulder, she looked around Grober's office with airy distaste and turned to him and said, "Are you Mr. Grober?" From her voice, she had gone to one of those Eastern colleges that teach women how to wear tweeds and talk with their teeth clenched.

Belatedly remembering to stand, Grober said, "Yes."

"I'm Winnifred Gail." She said the name as though she were granting a boon.

"Yes?" said Grober.

"The Gail Gallery. In Santa Fe."

"Oh, right," said Grober, who had never heard of the place. "Sure. What brings you to Albuquerque, Miss Gail?"

"Miz."

"Right. Miz." He smiled again, but wondered exactly how big a pain in the neck this woman was likely to be.

"I'm looking for a private investigator."

"Well," he said, smiling his heartiest smile, "it looks like you found one. Have a seat."

She inspected the client's chair for a moment as though she might find some crispy creature lounging on the Naugahyde, then sat down, settling her purse in her lap, crossing her long legs beneath the peasant skirt. She leaned forward and tapped her cigarette against the ashtray on Grober's desk. Her fingernails were long and sharp, painted the color of arterial blood.

Grober sat. "So. What can I do for you."

She inhaled on her cigarette. "I'd like you to locate a man for me."

Grober said, smiling again, "You have a particular man in mind?"

She smiled at him, briefly, bleakly. "Under different circumstances, Mr. Grober, I'm sure I'd find your puckish sense of humor infinitely entertaining. But at the moment, as it happens, I'm in something of a hurry. So suppose we just take my amusement as given, shall we, and dispense with the wit. Yes, a particular man. His name is Hubbard Baylor. Shall I spell that for you?"

A very major pain in the neck, it looked like; but business had been slow lately. Grober picked up his Eraser-mate. "Two b's in Hubbard?"

She nodded; Grober wrote the name down on his legal pad. He said, "Last known address?"

She gave it, an expensive subdivision on Sante Fe's west side.

"Description?"

"I've a photograph." She rummaged through her purse, found the photograph, held it out. Grober stood up and reached across the desk. "That was taken last week," she said.

It showed two people standing at poolside, arms around each other's waists, both smiling at the camera: Winnifred Gail in a bikini that could fit into an egg cup, and a tall, extravagantly muscled man in a brief swimsuit that could fit into another. His blond hair was artfully tousled, his grin was crowded with shiny teeth, and his heavy jaw looked strong enough to plow a furrow across the state of Indiana.

"He keeps in shape," Grober frowned.

"He works out with weights."

"Swell."

"I should warn you," she said, "that he can be rather a violent man. I've seen him fly into a rage over virtually nothing."

Grober reminded himself to load the Baur. If it came to rage-time, a few .25 slugs in the

pecs might slow this bozo down a bit. "Why is it you want to locate him, Ms. Gail?"

Her lips compressed. "I'm not entirely sure," she said, "that that's any of your business." She leaned forward and stabbed her cigarette out in Grober's ashtray.

Grober sighed. "Ms. Gail, I've got a license to think about here. If I'm going to run a trace on somebody, I've got to have a reason, or I could be open to a charge of violating his privacy."

"He stole something from me," she said simply.

"What?"

"A particular piece of art."

"Bigger than a breadbox? Look, you probably want it back, whatever it is. And unless you give me some idea what we're talking about, I could be tripping over the thing all day and never know it."

"I don't want you to approach Hubbard," she said. "Not at all. If you find him, I want you to report to me immediately."

"I don't have any problems with that." He glanced down at the photograph on his desk. The man's bicep was a shade larger than Grober's thigh. "But I'd still like to know what he took."

She frowned. "You're an awfully inquisitive man, Mr. Grober."

"Yeah. In a private detective, that's what you call a selling point."

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, considering; then she said, "Do you know anything about Hopi art?"

"I used to," he said. "But it's all slipped away. Why don't you refresh my memory."

"At the moment," she said, "Hopi art is selling extraordinarily well. Not so much the modern stuff, although that's not doing badly, but the antiquities, pottery and ceremonial objects from Awatovi, the ancestral Hopi city. Three months ago an Awatovi bowl sold in Munich for forty thousand dollars."

"Wait a minute," Grober said. "One bowl? Forty thousand dollars?"

She smiled, amused. "These pieces are appreciating now at an annual rate of over fifty percent, Mr. Grober. They're an excellent investment opportunity."

"Uh-huh. I guess I better tell my broker to dump the AT&T. Okay, so he stole one of these bowls?"

She shook her head. "*A ta-latsumsime.*"

"Oh. Right. And what would that be?"

"A small stick figure, carved from cottonwood root. It represents one of the Hopi deities, and dates back to the thirteenth century."

"And what's it worth?"

"I'd been offered thirty thousand."

Grober nodded. Forty thousand for a bowl, why not thirty thousand for a bundle of sticks. Clearly, he was in the wrong business. "Did you go to the cops?"

"No."

"How come?"

"For one thing, the provenance of the piece, the history of ownership, is . . . well, I suppose you could call it a trifle murky. The piece is quite genuine—I've had it authenticated—and, naturally, the manner in which I obtained it was perfectly legitimate. But there appear to be a few niggling questions about the manner in which it was originally obtained."

"It's hot, you mean."

"No. I do not mean."

"Warm?"

"I said, merely, that a few questions existed, nothing important, certainly nothing illegal. But there's been quite a lot of controversy recently about the market in Hopi ceremonials. I thought it best to move with discretion in my purchase of the piece, and in the arrangements for subsequent sale. Except for the man from whom I bought it, the man who appraised it, and the client to whom I promised it, only Hubbard knew I had it in my possession."

"And you want to keep it that way."

"Exactly."

"You're sure Baylor stole it?"

"I'm positive. Two days ago. Monday night."

"And he disappeared right afterward?"

"Yes. I tried calling him at his house, but there was no answer. When I drove over, his car was gone. I've made enquiries, discreetly, but no one seems to know where he's gone."

"Could he sell the thing?"

"Certainly. But Hubbard's a collector, it's more likely he plans to keep it. He's independently wealthy, and hardly needs the money he'd obtain."

"You don't have any idea where he could be?"

"None. But he does have a friend in Coreville, a woman. An old flame of sorts, apparently. They keep in touch, Hubbard told me, and she might know."

"Name and address?"

"Bonnie Little. She runs a restaurant there, I understand, on Main Street." She smiled. "It's called Little's Vittles, if you can believe that. She lives above it."

"Why not just call her up and ask her where he is?"

"If Hubbard has spoken to her, I'm sure he's told her not to discuss anything about him with me."

Grober nodded.

"Incidentally," she said, "I think it would be wise not to mention to the Little woman that you're a private investi-

gator. I don't know how Hubbard would react if he learned of it. Perhaps with violence, perhaps by hiding himself still more deeply. You might tell her that you're an old friend of his—he has a host of colorful characters in his background. You could use that photograph to establish your bona fides, so to speak."

Grober nodded absently; he was trying to picture himself as a colorful character.

"Is there anything else you need to know?" she asked him.

"A few more things," he said. "But first, I'm a little curious about why you didn't go to a Santa Fe P.I. Why come down here to me?"

She smiled. "Santa Fe's a small town, Mr. Grober. I'd rather no one there learned that Hubbard has done this to me. A matter of pride, more than anything else."

Grober nodded.

He opened the bottom desk drawer and reached in for a contract. He always had the clients sign a contract; it didn't necessarily keep them, or him, honest; but it kept everyone more or less legal.

She said, "I imagine you'll want a retainer of some sort. What would be reasonable?"

Taking a chance, Grober added fifty dollars to his daily rate, one hundred, and doubled it.

She agreed.

A mining town until its coal seam dwindled away, a ghost town for forty years afterward, Coreyville had become an artists' colony in the early seventies when a group of sculptors and weavers and painters had purchased land at cut-rate prices. Since then, speculators had moved in, and now, if you wanted to describe yourself as a Coreyville artist, you could pay thirty-five thousand dollars for a clapboard house with no plumbing that had, at the turn of the century, cost three dollars and fifty cents. And wasn't, in Grober's opinion, worth that much then or now.

It was an ugly town, locked between drab conical hills spotted with drab conical junipers. The frame houses, all huddled tightly together, still seemed coated with coal dust and soot.

Signs of progress, however, were available. There were boutiques that displayed Navaho pottery crafted by artisans from Newark, New Jersey, who had read extensively about the Navahos. There was a Wild West saloon that offered Japanese beer. There were eateries that supplied food—*quiche*, *sushi*, *pasta al pesto*—that would have made the long-departed miners scratch their heads, at prices that would have made them roll in merriment across the quaint hardwood floors.

Little's Vittles was such a

place. A small room, low-ceilinged, it held about ten tables, atop each of which was a white tablecloth and an unlit candle in a red glass bowl. Only three of the tables were occupied when Grober arrived at one thirty that afternoon. He chose the first table by the door, sat down, and examined the menu.

The woman who came to take his order was in her mid-twenties, petite, fine-boned, and wore straight blonde hair down past her shoulders. She also wore a plaid cotton shirt, big denim overalls, a plain white apron, and workboots. Grober was not favorably impressed; in his opinion, bib overalls should be worn only by people named Elmer.

Using his cowboy accent—he was, after all, working undercover—he ordered the teriyaki burger. (Six ninety-five, but it came with organic french fries.) When he finished eating, and the woman returned with his check, he said to her, "Scuse me, ma'am, but your name wouldn't be Bonnie Little, now would it?"

She smiled the way people do when a stranger knows their name, with a blend of puzzlement and pleasure. "Yes. But how . . ."

Grober grinned. "Friend of mine up to Santa Fe, Hubbard Baylor, he told me if I ever passed through Coreyville, I ought to stop by, grab some



grub, and look you up."

The puzzlement vanished from the smile, leaving only the pleasure. "Do you know Hubbard well?"

"Shoot yes, ma'am. Hub and I go back to the Flood."

The puzzlement returned, her eyebrows knitting. "Hub?"

Grober chuckled uneasily. "Well, yeah, that's what we used to call him down at the gym. Didn't ole Hub never tell you?"

She shook her head, smiling again. "And your name is . . ."

"Billy Bob Gibson, ma'am. No relation to Hoot." Chuckling genially now, Grober stood. "Right pleased to meet you."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Gibson." She offered her hand.

"*Billy Bob*," said Grober expansively, warming to his role. "*Billy Bob*. Don't nobody call me Mr. Gibson, although there's a few owlhoots call me a hell of a lot worse. 'Scuse my language now."

She laughed. "Are you in Coreyville on business, Billy Bob?"

"Nope, thing of it is, I'm on my way to Albuquerque to take a look-see at a passel of fillies for sale down there. Thought I'd stop in, give me hellos. Say now, come to think, you heard anything from ole Hub lately? He plumb dropped outta sight."

She frowned. "But . . ." Her frown deepened.

Grober laughed, knowing that

somehow he'd made a mistake, trying to bury it beneath a flood of heartiness. "Now ain't that just like ole Hub?"

She was frowning still, looking at him uncertainly. "Are you sure," she said, "that you're a friend of Hubbard's?"

"Well, course I am, ma'am. Lemme show you." Grateful for the opportunity to establish his bona fides, he tugged his wallet from his back pocket, took from it the photograph given him by Winnifred Gail, handed it to her. "Snapped that last week out to my place. That Hub, he takes a good picture, now don't he?"

"Last week," she said, looking up.

"Yep. Gave a little barbecue, had a few folks over. Roasted an ox."

She frowned again, quickly, sharply, and handed back the photograph. She said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Gibson, but I can't help you."

"How's that?" he said, sliding the wallet into his pocket.

"I don't know where Hubbard is."

She was distant now, and cold, and Grober didn't know why.

"Well now," he began.

"I'm sorry," she snapped. "I can't help you. Your bill comes to seven fifty, Mr. Gibson. Will that be cash or charge?"

Time to bail out. "Cash, I reckon."

Grober walked down to the lot where he'd parked the Pinto, got into it, started it, and drove it slowly back toward the restaurant. He parked across the street—in the shade, where, from the restaurant, she would be unlikely to see him inside the car.

Something had put a burr under her saddle. (Remnants of Billy Bob were still coloring Grober's thought.) What had it been? The picture? But she'd been suspicious, closing up, even before she saw it.

He reached over, popped open the glove compartment, took out the pint of V.O., uncapped it, and had himself a hit. He settled back and began to wait. A car passed him, heading south, toward Albuquerque.

At three o'clock, after the restaurant's last customers had left, Bonnie Little hung a CLOSED sign on the window, then crossed the room and disappeared behind the swinging doors that led to the kitchen.

Time passed, and with it some more cars, most of them heading north, toward Santa Fe. Up the street, a motorcyclist in a leather jacket and a white helmet emerged from an alley, climbed aboard a big multi-cylindere Honda, revved it up, and set off for Albuquerque, racing past Grober with a roar.

Idiot, Grober thought. He lifted the bottle of V.O., stopped

himself . . . something about the motorcyclist.

Damn. It had been a woman. And bulky jeans, leather workboots. Bonnie Little?

He pulled himself from the car, stalked across the street, pounded at the restaurant's door.

The Hispanic cook, when he finally came, told Grober that Bonnie Little had just left, on her motorcycle.

Grober walked back to the car. He had blown it—she must have spotted him. And there was no way the Pinto could catch up to her machine. The only thing he could do now was wait.

Grober got a big kick out of Cyril Draper. Cyril was something called an amateur sleuth, and he was forever going on vacations to tiny English villages where, between sets of tennis and bridge, he invariably stumbled into a murder investigation. His current investigation concerned the mysterious death (cyanide, bonbons) of Lord Harcourt of Lower Rumble. Cyril had just gathered all the suspects together in the Harcourts' library—Colonel Pottering; Dr. Llewelyn, the vicar; Gwendolyn Montrose; Teddy Semple-Smythe; Naomi Withers (Grober's bet); and Lady Harcourt herself—when the sleek silver Porsche pulled up in front

of Bonnie Little's restaurant.

Grober set aside the book (*Death Gets Knocked Up at Nine*) and watched. It was now six o'clock.

Hubbard Baylor stepped from the car. Wearing running shoes, tan slacks, and a white shirt with a little alligator over the heart, he moved smoothly on the balls of his feet, broad shoulders back, lean hips thrust forward, and Grober decided that he, personally, wouldn't want to go up against the man with anything less than a battle cruiser.

Baylor tried the restaurant's door, found it locked, and with no hesitation, reached into his pocket and pulled out a key.

Interesting, Grober thought.

Baylor walked across to the swinging doors, pushed his way through them. Five minutes passed. Then Baylor reappeared through the doors, recrossed the room, left the restaurant, and padded back to the Porsche. He started it and drove off, heading north.

Grober gave him a few seconds' head start, then followed. Hoping that Baylor kept the Porsche within the United States government's speed limit, which also happened to be the Pinto's.

**B**aylor did, and Grober followed him all the way into Santa Fe.

Baylor certainly

wasn't acting like someone who had disappeared. First, he had a lavish dinner, alone, at the Sheraton on St. Francis Drive (Grober had salsa and chips and a couple of V.O. sodas at the bar). Then he drove to Victor's, on San Francisco, and savored one brandy, and then another (while Grober nursed two more V.O. sodas).

Grober was beginning to worry about the man's spotting him, so when Baylor drove to the Purple Hogan, Grober crept around to the empty alleyway in the back, and maintained surveillance through the small window that gave him a good view of the entire room. And it was here, at approximately one o'clock, that someone slammed him over the head with a locomotive.

**“W**ell,” said Danny, grudgingly, “your polygraph checks out.” Because a police officer's brother was involved, the Department had used an outside polygraph expert, not their own, to verify Grober's story. “And Miss Gail should be here any minute.”

“What about the Pinto and the gun?” Grober asked. “You lift any prints?” His head was pounding. He had just returned to Danny's office after spending two hours with Sergeant Munsen in the interrogation room.

Danny shook his head. "Both wiped clean."

"That makes sense. I shoot someone in my own car, with my own gun, and then wipe off the prints. The criminal mastermind at work."

Danny shook his head, sat back, stared up at the ceiling. "Jeez, Phil, how could you do this to me?"

"You?"

"Do you know how this is going to look on my record? My own brother, a suspect in a murder case. And not just any murder case. No. It turns out that we've been keeping an eye on this Baylor for the past two months. Hernandez, over in Narcotics, just spent ten minutes jumping on my tail."

"Yeah, my heart really bleeds for you and Hernandez. My troubles are zip compared to yours. I mean, hey, what's a little concussion, right? In another month or two I'll probably be able to eat solid food."

"The doctor that Munsen called in says you don't have a concussion."

"Yeah, well," said Grober, probing the lump on his skull with tentative fingers, "I'd like a second opinion."

"I've got a second opinion," Danny said. "You're a jerk."

Grober nodded. "For this, I used to stop the neighborhood bully from beating up on you when we were kids."

"Phil, when we were kids,

you *were* the neighborhood bully."

Grober ignored that. "Narcotics, huh? What kind of drugs are we talking?"

"Coke."

"Yeah? So what was the deal?"

Danny made a sour face.

"Come on, Danny. I'm in this movie, too, remember."

Danny frowned. "The story was that Baylor had connections to some bigtime buyers down in Albuquerque. He was supposed to be there on a meet yesterday."

"If Narcotics was keeping an eye on him, then how come . . ." Grober paused, and then suddenly he laughed. "They lost him, didn't they? They tailed him to Albuquerque and then they lost him."

"He pulled a U-turn at an intersection downtown. He must've spotted them."

Grober laughed again. "That restaurant down in Coreville. Did they know about that?"

Danny nodded. "They had a man there. The cook. But no one thought of getting in touch with him, and he was under orders not to break cover."

"That's really terrific teamwork there, Danny."

Danny grunted. "It was Hernandez, not me."

"What about Baylor's car? The Porsche? You found that yet?"

"It was still in the lot at the Purple Hogan. A forensics crew

just finished tearing it apart. Clean, no coke. Hernandez thinks whoever killed Baylor ripped it off. If it ever existed."

"Some dealer killed him?" Grober shook his head. "No. It was that woman down in Correyville. Bonnie Little."

Danny looked at him.

"First of all," said Grober, "how would a dealer know that I had any connection to Baylor? Why would he sap me in the alley?"

"Why would Little?"

"She knew I was hanging around, looking for him, and she wanted to get to him without me seeing her."

"How'd she know you were in the alley?"

"She recognized my car in the lot. She must've made me when I was in the Pinto watching her restaurant. She saw the car, and knew I had to be hanging around somewhere. Maybe she looked inside for me first. Maybe she was coming into the alley to use that window, the way I did."

"Uh-huh. And how did she know that Baylor would be at the Purple Hogan?"

"Maybe they'd arranged to meet there, earlier. Besides, a guy like Baylor, rich, how many places would he go to in Santa Fe? Three, maybe? Four? All she had to do was drive around, check them out until she found the Porsche."

"Assuming she knew he was

in Santa Fe at all."

"Obviously, she did."

"Oh yeah. Obviously. Tell me this, Phil. Why'd she steal the Pinto?"

"She went through my pockets, she found my gun. She decided to dust him. She drives a motorcycle, Danny. That's not the best thing to use if you want to blow someone away in private."

"Why'd she go through your pockets?"

"How do I know? You're the cop, you find out. Danny, she's the only person involved in this who could've known that the keys in my pocket fit the Pinto."

Danny shook his head in mock admiration. "Amazing, Phil. I really don't know how the Department gets along without your help. Have you worked out a motive yet? I'd be real honored if you'd share it with me."

"There's gotta be one."

Danny nodded. "Yeah, generally. So suppose you tell me why Bonnie Little shot Hubbard Baylor, when the two of them got married just a week ago."

"They got *what*?"

"Married."

As Grober was assimilating this, someone knocked at Danny's door.

"Come in," Danny called out.

A woman entered. She was somewhere between fifty and sixty years old, and somewhere between two hundred and three

hundred pounds. She wore sandals, a lemon-yellow caftan, and a broad-brimmed flowered hat atop an explosion of bright red hair. She turned from Grober to Danny and said, "I'm supposed to see a Lieutenant Grober?"

Danny stood up. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I'm Winnifred Gail."

Danny looked at Grober. Grober closed his mouth, which had dropped open. He sighed and said, "It figures."

Winnifred Gail knocked back the shooter of fifteen-year-old bourbon in one gulp and then, sighing happily, plopped her heavy body back in her chair. "So you think it was Bonnie Little."

Sitting on the padded leather ottoman opposite her desk, a slab of three inch glass maybe eight feet wide, Grober sipped at his shot glass. "The police think so, too. Sergeant Munsen asked the sheriff's department to bring her in for questioning."

Winnifred Gail refilled her glass from the bottle standing on a copy of *Art Space* magazine. "Well," she said, "it doesn't really surprise me. She's an artist. Painter. She may run a restaurant, but she thinks of herself as an artist. And artists are all nuts." She turned slightly in the chair, indicated with her shot glass the painting that

hung on the wall behind her; it looked, to Grober, like two whoopee cushions mating. "That thing. Man who did it nearly killed his girlfriend last year. She started to hum while he was working, and he went bonkers. Tried to strangle her with his jump rope." She shook her head. "Lunatics, the whole bunch."

"Yeah, but why would Little kill Baylor?"

She shrugged. "Bonnie was the jealous type, I'd heard. Maybe *she* heard he was playing around."

"Was he?"

She shook her head. "Don't think so. He used to. Used to be famous for it. Different sweetie every month, and usually a little something on the side. But the way I hear it, he straightened up after he got involved with Bonnie. Went real domestic. They took turns staying at each other's place, and they were building a house down in Cerillos, between here and Correyville. Hubbard just put his own house up for sale last week."

"What did he do, Baylor?"

"Do? For a living? Nothing. He didn't have to. Wealthy family, trust fund. If you asked him, he'd tell you he was in investments. Which was true, in a way—but they were all his daddy's."

"The police think he was dealing coke."

"Nah. Oh, he sold some now



and then, but he gave away most of what he had. He never did it for the money, that's for sure. Didn't have to. Born with a silver spoon in his nose." She laughed, a short quick bark.

"Sounds like you knew him pretty well."

She shrugged. "I sell Indian artifacts. We've done business together, Hubbard and I. He was a collector. So was Bonnie—sold her a few pieces when she first came to town, a year ago. Their collections, that's what first brought them together. That, and their money."

"Money?" said Grober, surprised. "You mean Little's got money, too?"

"Sure. Another trust fund baby."

"Then how come she runs a restaurant? How come she goes around dressed like Walter Brennan?"

"Some rich folks are just plain embarrassed by their cash. Bonnie paints, she runs the restaurant, she does charity work. The money's not supposed to matter." She grinned. "Course, when it came to marrying, you'll notice she didn't pick herself a busboy."

"And you say she was the jealous type?"

"Yep."

"Who'd know about that?"

"Here in Santa Fe? Anyone. Everyone. This is a small town. Greenwich Village in the desert. Santa Fe produces four

things—good art, bad art, good Mexican food, and dandy gossip. Everybody knows who's sleeping with whom, and who isn't, and why. Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't have it any other way." She barked again. "A girl's got to have *some* fun."

"It'd be my guess," Grober grinned, "that you get more than some."

She grinned back. "Buttering me up, huh? Good. Good technique." She eyed him speculatively. "Shame you're not twenty years younger."

Grober shrugged. "I didn't look any better then."

She barked. "It's not the looks, honey, it's the stamina."

"I gave up stamina when I was twelve. It was wearing me out."

Another bark. "Here. Have some more of this good bourbon. Build up your strength."

"Is that a threat?" Grober asked her as she refilled his glass.

She barked again. "Take it any way you want."

Grober decided that the safest thing to do was to ignore it. He said, "This woman who came to my office and said she was you. She told me that Baylor had stolen some piece of Hopi art from her. A *talot*-something. Made out of cottonwood root."

"A *talaotsumsime*?" Still another bark. "Pulling your leg, honey. There are only four of

them in the whole world, and they were all stolen last year from Shungopavi—that's the shrine on the Hopi second mesa, in Arizona. No dealer in his right mind—no reputable dealer, anyway—would touch one of those. The FBI's been tracking them since last December. And I know a Hopi or two, right here in town, who'd be happy to cut your throat if he thought you had one. Hopis are generally a real peaceful people, but those things were used in a couple of their most important rituals, and they're irreplaceable, the rituals can't be performed without them. The Hopis are pretty disturbed."

"Would she have to be an art dealer to know about them?"

"Not here in Santa Fe. We're all experts here."

"Why do you figure she used your name?"

She shrugged. "If she wanted to run this Hopi scam on you, I'm the only game in town. There are only two well-known dealers of ancient Indian artifacts in Santa Fe, and she would've had a real hard time impersonating Sam Taylor. He's five feet tall and bald as a honeydew melon. About as smart, too. What'd this bimbo look like, anyway?"

Grober described her.

"Skinny, huh," she said. "Well, some are built for speed." She leered over her shot glass. "And some are built for comfort."

Grober decided to ignore that, as well. "Do you know her?"

She shook her head. "Don't think so. No one around here dresses like that. Except at Halloween."

"She talked," Grober said, "like she went to one of those women's colleges back east. Vassar, Bryn Mawr. Like she had a mouth full of marbles."

"Nope . . . Oh. Of course. Of course. That *witch*. Wait, I think I've even got a picture."

She got up, walked to a file cabinet, pulled out a drawer. "Back issue of *Southwest Art*," she said. "I think, let me see, I think it was last December. Big opening over on Canyon Road. Here." She slipped out a magazine, opened it, riffled through the pages. "Hah. Score one for the large lady."

She came over to Grober and laid the opened magazine on his lap. "That her?"

Grober nodded. "That's her."

She was wearing black slacks and a grey silk blouse when she opened the heavy hardwood door. Her hair was shoulder length now, but Grober, having seen her photograph, was expecting that; she had worn a wig when she came to his office.

The moment she saw him, her face tightened and she reached out for the door again. Grober rammed his foot against its bottom.

"Hi," he said. "You come here often?"

Her upper lip curled back. "I could call the police."

Grober grinned. "That'll be swell."

She glared at him.

"It won't take long," he said. "I only want to fill in a few details."

Abruptly, wordlessly, she spun around and stalked down the hallway, her heels clicking on the red tiling. Grober followed her, pushing the door shut behind him.

She crossed the living room and stopped before the broad expanse of window, her back to Grober. She folded her arms beneath her breasts and looked down at the city of Santa Fe, the mountains far beyond turning pink now as the sun set.

It was an enormous room. A twelve foot high ceiling, supported by carefully oiled *vigas*, beams of straight pine log. Persian carpets, a long white sectional couch, leather chairs, a huge fieldstone fireplace.

"Verritt," Grober said. "Monica Verritt. That right?"

She said nothing.

"Did you hear the news?" Grober asked. "It was on the radio a while ago. Bonnie Little just confessed to shooting Hubbard Baylor."

She turned to face him. "What do you want?"

"Just a talk. Why don't you sit down."

Her eyes narrowed. "Blackmail. Is that it?" Suddenly her face relaxed; she laughed. "You sad, deluded little man. You haven't a prayer of getting a dime from me."

Grober shook his head. "No blackmail."

"I've done nothing wrong. I have absolutely no moral responsibility for what happened."

"Moral responsibility," Grober nodded. "Nice."

"And even if I had, whose word do you think the police will accept? *Mine*, or that of some fat, sleazy private detective?"

Grober sighed. "Sit down, lady, and shut up, so I can get this over and get out of here."

She sucked in a breath, let it out, then walked to the couch and sat down, her back rigid. "You have ten minutes."

"Terrific." He sat down opposite her in a leather chair. He said, "Six months ago, you and Hubbard Baylor were an item. Lot of people thought the two of you were going to make it permanent. So did you. But he dumped you, and after a while he took up with Bonnie Little. You didn't like that. You've got a pretty large idea of who you are—rich widow, patron of the arts, very hot stuff here in Santa Fe—and the idea of Baylor and Little didn't sit too good with you."

She leaned forward, opened

a small mahogany box on the coffee table, removed from it a thin brown cigarette. "You appear," she said, "to have become a mine of information about me."

"I had a talk with Winnifred Gail. The real one."

She lit the cigarette, blew a cone of blue smoke toward the floor. "That absurd old hag. She's pathetic. She buys young boys, did you know that?"

Grober shrugged. "Not much point in buying old ones."

"Anyway, it didn't sit any better with you when Baylor and Little got married. You decided to do something about it."

With thumb and ring finger she plucked a tobacco flake from her lower lip. She smiled blandly. "Did I?"

"You came up with a plan. You couldn't use a local — everyone here in Santa Fe knows everyone else. And you needed an airhead, someone who didn't know what the deal was, someone who'd take in all the smoke you put out about Hopis and missing art. So you found me. You gave me that picture of you and Baylor, told me it was taken a week ago, told me I should use it to prove I was Baylor's friend. There was maybe a fifty-fifty chance I'd have to show it, but you figured that if I did, Little would go off the beam. You knew she was goofy with jealousy."

"There's virtually no way I

could have anticipated what happened."

"Yeah. When you toss a spanner into a diesel engine, you never know what's gonna go first. And here's some other stuff you couldn't know. I talked to the cops before I came here. Little clubbed me over the head outside the Purple Hogan. When she was looking for the picture you gave me—she wanted to throw it in his face, she says—she found my gun. She took it along. To scare him into telling the truth. She also took my car—she didn't want to talk to him in the Porsche. That was his territory, she says. Sounds loopy to me, but I don't think she had all her oars in the water right then."

Grober crossed his legs. "Anyway, Little picked him up and drove him a few blocks away, showed him the photograph, pulled out the gun. Baylor denied having anything to do with you. But here's the cute part. It turns out that he *was* playing around, with some cutie down in Albuquerque. He went down there yesterday for a couple of hours of slap and tickle.

"The cops were following him at the time—they were looking for a cocaine bust. Baylor spotted the tail and lost it—he thought it was Little, or someone hired by Little, checking up on him. Pretty funny, huh? Everybody was running

around in circles yesterday. Slapstick city."

Monica Verritt didn't smile. She said, "So you see he *was* unfaithful. He deserved to die."

"Maybe. He probably had a different opinion. But he didn't have all his oars in the water either, it looks like, because he told all this to Little while she was holding a gun on him. And she shot him."

Monica Verritt raised her cigarette, inhaled on it, and blew a languid plume of smoke toward Grober. "She's thoroughly insane. I warned Hubbard about her."

"Yeah," he said. "I bet you did."

She flicked the cigarette lightly against the ashtray. "Are you quite finished now?"

"Almost."

"Good. This has all been rather tedious."

"Nah," Grober said, shaking his head. "The tedious part doesn't start till we get to court."

She raised an eyebrow. "To court?"

"Sure. The cops got a confession from Little, so her lawyer, whoever he is, even if he's some total doofus hot out of law school, he's bound to shoot for temporary insanity. Since I'm the guy who set things in motion, I'll be subpoenaed to testify. And naturally, being under oath and all, I'll have to tell them about you."

She smiled. "They'll never

believe you, you know. I have a certain standing in this community."

"Not then you won't. Not after the lawsuits."

She laughed, lightly, musically. "*Lawsuits?*"

"Mine and Winnifred Gail's. She's suing you for punitive damages because you used her name. It's not illegal to impersonate an art dealer." As Winnifred Gail had said, and barked with laughter, a lot of people did that in Santa Fe. "But it is illegal to impersonate a *particular* art dealer, or any particular business owner, and sign his name to a contract. It also leaves you open to civil suit. Section 55 of the Criminal Code, Article 3, Paragraph 405. I looked it up."

"How enterprising of you." She smiled, clearly entertained. "And you're suing me as well, are you?"

"Right. It was me you signed the contract with. For one week, at a hundred and fifty per diem. You paid an advance of three hundred, but never paid the balance."

She sat back, her smile widening. "So it *is* blackmail. Or a pitiful attempt at it."

Grober shook his head. "No. I don't want your money. I'd rather sue. That way, I can collect punitive damages, just like Winnifred Gail."

"Ah, but you seem to be forgetting something. How are you

going to prove that I did any of this?"

"You're the one forgetting things. Your handwriting is on the contract. Your prints are all over my office. And remember that picture you gave me, of you and Hubbard Baylor? The cops have it now. Your prints are on that, too, and so are mine. All of it will come out at your trial."

"My trial?" Surprised, and no longer smiling.

"Right. The one for fraud and forgery. Winnifred Gail and I already went to the cops with all this. They're drawing up a warrant right now."

Once again she laughed, but now the music had drained away, leaving the laughter hollow and brittle. "You can't be serious."

Grober nodded. "Sure I can."

She leaned forward, carefully put out her cigarette. She looked up at him. "It'll never get to court."

Grober shrugged. "Maybe not. But maybe it will. And it'll definitely get to the newspapers. With that, and with the civil suits, mine and Winnifred Gail's, by the time Bonnie Little comes to trial, your swell standing in the community will be lying down, flat on its back. You know, I wouldn't really be surprised if she got an acquittal. Young artist, just married, jerked around by a nasty older

woman. That's the way I'd go, if I were her lawyer."

Monica Verritt sat back, crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "Why?" she said. "Why are you doing this?"

Grober said, "Winnifred Gail's doing it because she doesn't like you. Come right down to it, I don't think very many people do. I know I don't. You used me. *I was the spanner.*" He shrugged. "Like you said in my office. It's a matter of pride."

Her lip curled. "*Pride.*"

"Yeah," he said. "There's a lot of it going around." He stood up, turned, and walked away, across the Persian carpet.

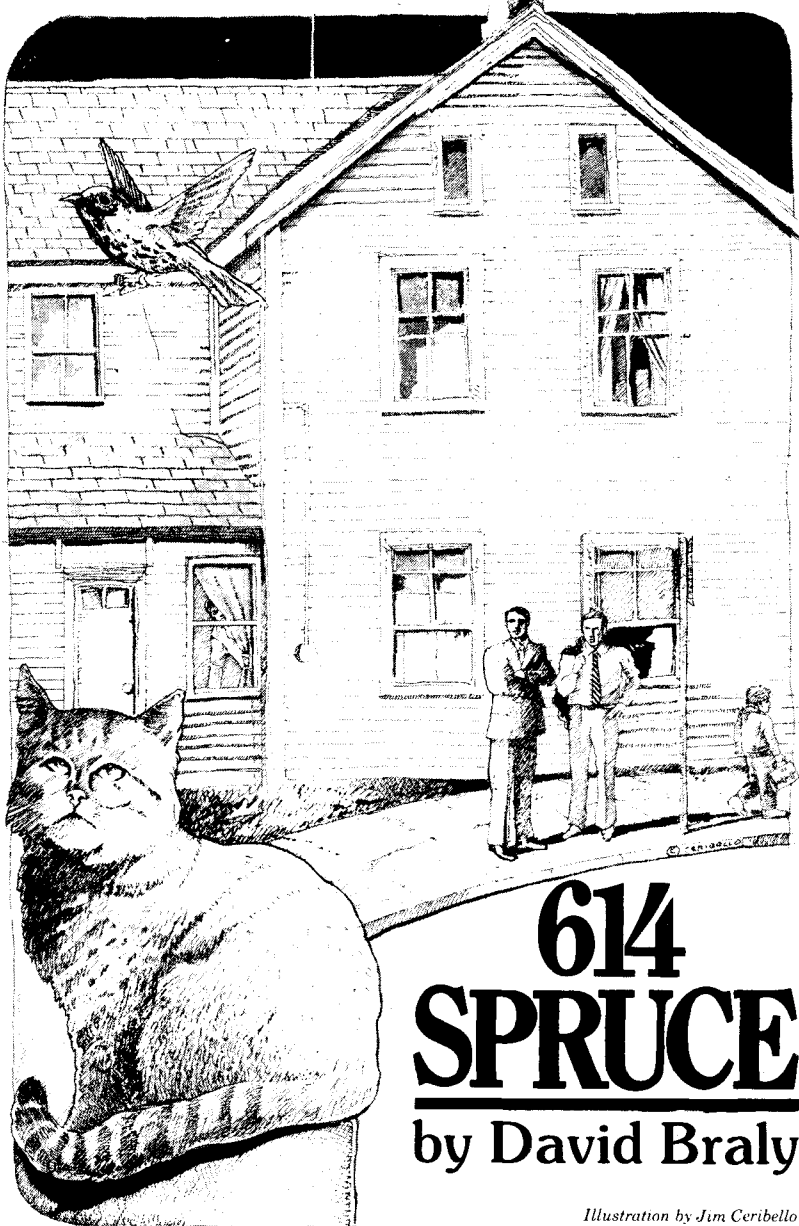
He had almost reached the front door when, behind him, at the end of the hallway, she shouted, calling him a particularly unpleasant name. He wheeled around in time to see the cigarette box come spinning toward his head. He ducked; it shattered against the door, thin brown cigarettes flying everywhere. He looked back at her.

She stood there, breathing heavily, arms limp at her sides. Then her face screwed up and she spat the name again. But more softly now, and with spite rather than fury, and the spite hopeless and empty, like a wounded child's.

"Right," Grober said. "See you in court." He opened the door and stepped into the night.



FICTION



# 614 SPRUCE

by David Braly

*Illustration by Jim Ceribello*

Inside 614 Spruce Willie Jones peeked out a living room window to see if any police cars were in the area. There was no reason why there should be, but he worried about them. Always.

"Get away from there," said Coleman. "Either that or open the drapes. Peeking out that way looks suspicious."

Stan Coleman was in an armchair reading the morning newspaper. He was dressed in grey slacks and a white shirt but hadn't put his shoes on yet, just his grey socks. His shirt was open at the collar. Coleman had opened the drapes of the window behind him, in the same wall as the window Willie Jones peeked through.

Jones let the drape edge fall back into place. He strolled into the kitchen.

Outside 614 Spruce children walked down the sidewalk on their way to school. They bore a beaten, defeated look. School was almost over. Every day dragged like a rainy week in July. Already the air was warm beneath the clear blue sky; already the trees were heavy with green leaves; already there were bees and butterflies and summer birds like robins and sparrows.

One English sparrow was busy at an eave of 614 Spruce, building a nest.

On the four-lane street that little Spruce led into, an ambulance passed with siren blaring and lights flashing. No one paid much attention. This was a city, not a town.

Inside 614 Spruce Willie Jones broke an egg into a poacher. He tossed the shell into a yellow plastic trash can at the foot of the cabinet, placed the poacher lid on, walked to the stove, and put the poacher on the front left burner. He pressed the "high" button. He pulled the poacher to the edge so that when the hotplate reddened the water wouldn't boil over. He dropped a slice of whole wheat bread into the toaster.

"Darn Russians," said Coleman in the living room.

Jones walked to the door between the kitchen and the living room. "What?" he asked.

"I said those darn Russians are at it again. I don't see why that airhead in the White House doesn't do something about 'em."

"Like what?"

"Hell, I don't know. Something."

Jones glanced at the stove. Steam was rising from the poacher, and the lid was vibrating, but the water wasn't boiling over.

"The trouble is we keep going after the little guys," continued Coleman. "Instead of going against Nicaragua or Vietnam or Cuba we ought to make trouble for Russia itself. Hit 'em in Eastern

Europe by starting and funding resistance guerrilla organizations. Put 'em on the defensive."

"That'd be suicidal."

"Hardly. If a gang attacks you on the sidewalk, what do you do?"

"Run."

"No," Coleman said disgustedly. "You take out the biggest guy. You don't go after the littlest, or you'd have to fight every one of 'em. You take out the big guy, then the rest'll leave you alone."

The toast popped up. Jones walked back to the cupboard, took down a plate, and placed it on the Formica cabinet top. He removed the toast from the toaster and put it on the plate, then got margarine from the butter bowl and spread it on the toast, using an army surplus knife. Afterward, he lifted the poacher lid to examine the egg, but the white was still mostly liquid.

Jones heard Coleman say something in the living room. He walked to the door again and asked, "What?"

"I said, 'Those darn Arabs.'"

"Oh."

Outside 614 Spruce a tiger-striped alley cat noticed the English sparrow flying with a twig in its beak to the topmost eave of the house. He positioned himself beneath a lilac bush and waited.

Two men in grey business suits and carrying attache cases stopped in front of the house next to 614, beside a triangular blue sign with the words "Bus Stop" on it. They talked to each other and glanced at their wristwatches.

Inside 614 Spruce Jones examined his egg again. The white looked fairly solid. He didn't want it too solid or else the yoke would also solidify, and he preferred that the yoke flow over his toast when broken. He turned off the burner, carried the poacher to the cabinet, and slid the egg onto his toast. After shaking salt onto it, he cut it twice lengthwise and twice widthwise, making nine squares of egg and toast.

Jones carried his plate into the living room. He sat on the sofa near Coleman's armchair. "Give me the comics, will ya?"

Coleman hunted through the paper, found the comics page, and handed it to him. Then he turned back to what he'd been reading.

Jones ate his egg while he read the comics. Then he tossed the page back to Coleman. "Be sure to read 'Snuffy Smith' today," he said.

"I always do."

Jones took his empty plate into the kitchen.

Outside 614 Spruce a young woman wearing a chic blouse, jacket,

and skirt approached the bus stop. The two men stopped talking to each other and talked to her.

The bus arrived.

The three boarded it.

It left.

A large boxer arrived, marking territory at every tree and bush. The tiger-striped cat left in a hurry.

The sparrow found some string.

Inside 614 Spruce Jones reentered the living room. He walked over to the closed drapes again and peeked out.

"Damn it, Willie, stop that!"

Jones turned from the window. "It don't hurt to be careful."

"Like hell. If somebody sees you peeking out, they'll get suspicious."

"Big deal. What're they gonna do about it?"

"Just stop it. Besides, the cops ain't got reason to take any notice of this place. Even if they had, they'd need 'probable cause' to bust in."

"Don't you call a basement full of marijuana 'probable cause'?"

"They have to know it's there before they can come in and look for it. And there's no way for the cops to know about those bags, let alone what's in 'em."

"When that van pulls up an hour from now—"

"When it does," interrupted Coleman, "there's no reason for anyone to think that something unusual is happening. Just a few men loading a van with junk in garbage bags. Stop worrying. You're driving me bananas."

Jones returned to the sofa. On the end table beside it was an old *National Geographic*, and he began thumbing through it.

A few minutes later Coleman said, "Stupid legislature."

Outside 614 Spruce a man who wore a white shirt with grey sweater and slacks walked up to the bus stop and put his briefcase on the sidewalk. He glanced at his wristwatch. He lit a cigarette, then unfolded a newspaper he had been carrying beneath his arm.

The sparrow, its nest almost completed, found a couple of twigs that it carried up.

A jet airplane left a white streak across the sky.

Inside 614 Spruce Stan Coleman tossed aside the newspaper and looked at his wristwatch. "We'd better get those bags up here so we can load 'em in the van fast when it comes."

Willie Jones put down the *National Geographic*. "That suits me just fine," he said.

They went into the basement.

Outside 614 Spruce the boxer appeared from around the corner of the house next door and trotted toward the man at the bus stop. The man looked up from his newspaper; the boxer stopped fifteen feet from him. Dog and man stared at each other for a half minute, and then, to the man's intense relief, the boxer turned away.

The man tried to resume reading his newspaper, but he kept glancing in the direction the boxer had gone. It'd been a big dog.

Seconds later the bus arrived. The man flipped his cigarette onto the sidewalk, folded his newspaper and placed it under his left arm, lifted his briefcase, and climbed into the bus. The bus left.

The tiger-striped cat reappeared on the opposite side of Spruce. He looked for the boxer. He didn't see him. He waited at the corner of the house, watching the sparrow and watching out for the boxer. He wanted to cross to the lilac again. But he wouldn't take the chance. He sat down and waited and looked.

Inside 614 Spruce Stan Coleman and Willie Jones carried one garbage bag full of marijuana after another up to the living room. They stacked them near the front door.

"If the cops come—" began Jones.

"Forget it," snapped Coleman. "There's no reason for cops to be anywhere near here."

They went back down into the basement. Only two bags remained, but when Jones lifted one of them, it split open. Coleman, cursing, got another bag and helped Jones scoop the marijuana into it.

Outside 614 Spruce the sparrow landed on the sidewalk, picked up the cigarette butt discarded by the man who'd stood at the bus stop, and flew back to the nest.

The cat watched him.

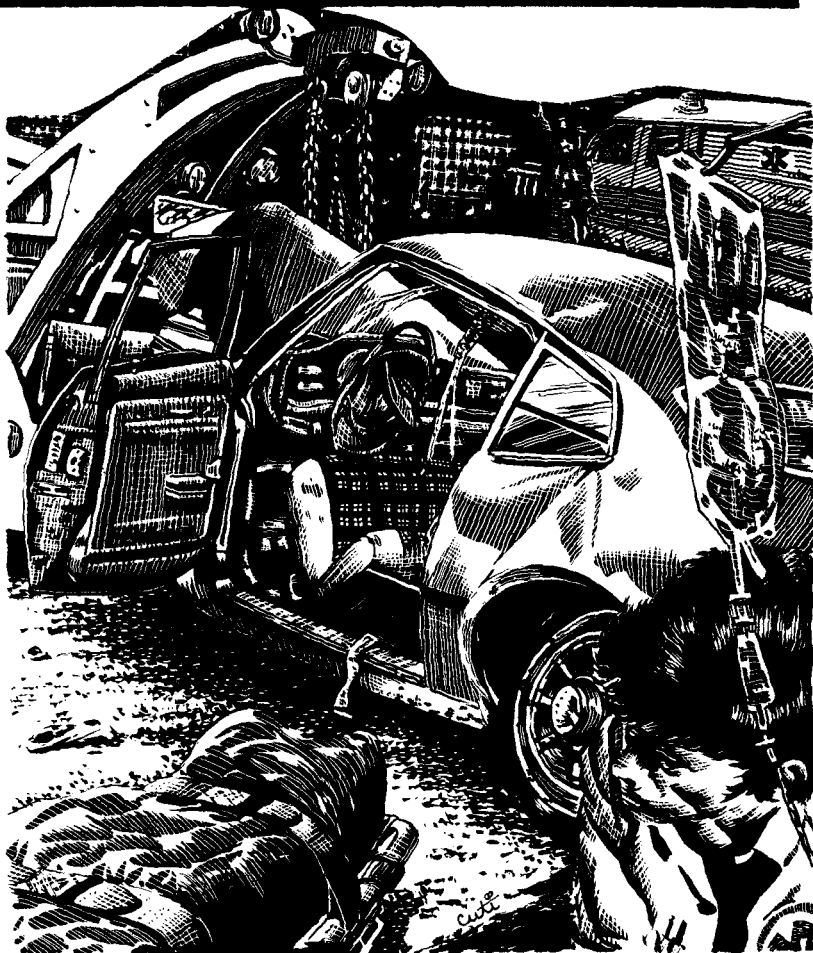
Inside 614 Spruce Coleman and Jones finished loading the bag. Instead of immediately taking the last two bags upstairs, however, they sat resting and talking. They talked about how they were going to spend the money they'd get for the marijuana. Coleman looked at his wristwatch; the van wasn't due for thirty minutes.

Outside 614 Spruce the cat watched flames engulf the sparrow's nest, climb the eave, and spread across the roof.

The sparrow flew around frantically. That made the cat hungry, but the cat turned and hurried away when he saw the boxer returning.

FICTION

# Poor by Bill Crenshaw Dumb Mouths



*Illustration by Nicola Cuti*

*"I tell you that which you yourselves do know,  
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor, poor dumb mouths,  
And bid them speak for me."*

Julius Caesar, III.ii

"**S**ame deal, Adam. Five bucks an hour, ten hours tops. Anything over ten's a freebie." McMorton thumbed the folder with a thumb unnaturally soft and pink, a thumb streaked from pinching the moist end of his unnaturally brown and foul cigar.

Adameus Clay took the folder from him delicately and with some disgust, though it didn't show on his face. Disgust rarely showed on his face. He almost always appeared to be smiling, even in his sleep. It was a physiological quirk that he had often regretted, though he had to admit that in the long run it had probably done him more good than harm. But the run had been long indeed, and just when the end was in sight, five years until early retirement, along came the twins and . . .

"Adam. You hearin' me?"

"Of course, Marvyn."

"Well, don't space out on me, hear? I mean, brother-in-law or no brother-in-law, you space out, you're through. Jiminy. Like I was saying, this one shouldn't be more than a four

hour job. An hour with the beneficiary, an hour on the reports, an hour writing it all up. I'm giving you an extra hour for fumbles." McMorton leaned far back in his swivel chair, which Clay thought a dangerous thing to do, given all that bulk, and somehow grinned around the cigar clamped between yellow-tinted teeth. Clay knew what was coming because the same thing came at this time every time. "But this one's so easy," said McMorton, "that even a Ph.D. could do it." Then he laughed, the one sound that by itself could twist Clay's face into a reasonable facsimile of disgust. "Well, good to see ya and all, Adam, but I'm a busy man, busy man. I don't get paid to sit on my duff like you high foreheads do."

Clay bit back a torrent of abuse, thinking particularly of Kent's torrent against the wormy Oswald in Act II of *King Lear*. To all appearances, however, he was still smiling vaguely. He forced his next words out with difficulty. "Uh, Marvyn, I need more money?" Somehow it came out as a question.

"Yeah, so do I. Five bucks. Period."

"You pay other claims investigators more."

"Other claims investigators? You an investigator? Look, Adam, old bean, old chap, I'm



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doing you a favor, right? Gift horse, right? I mean, I'm going out on a limb here. Ever hear of nepa, of nepa . . ."

"Nepotism." Clay shuddered at the implications of the word and closed his eyes against the sight of the primary implication and its fat cigar.

"Right. I could lose my job."

Clay could see that McMorton was about to laugh again, so he stood up quickly. "Well, thank you anyway, Marvyn. My best to Ruth. I'd better be . . ."

But it was too late, and it was beyond laughter and into guffawing. "Of course, if you find fraud here,"—McMorton broke up completely for some long seconds—"fraud here, Acme Home and Casualty will pay you fifteen percent of a hundred and eighty G's. That's . . . that's . . ."

"Twenty-seven thousand dollars," murmured Clay wistfully.

"Yeah." Guffaw turned into bellow. "Fat chance."

Which was the term Adameus Clay used to refer to his brother-in-law from that moment on.

Clay felt guilty all the way to the hospital.

He should be grateful, he knew, and he felt guilty that he wasn't more grateful, but it was hard to be

grateful to Fat Chance. He had even calmly and rationally drawn up a list of all the reasons that he should be grateful—his brother-in-law was providing extra money, was letting him work at a job for which he had no training, had not let age stand in the way. But for every reason to be grateful, there was an equally compelling reason to punch Fat Chance's potato nose—you call that money, no one needs training for this, age deserves some respect.

"Oh, well," he sighed as he eased into the parking lot, "make virtue of necessity."

But it was hard to make virtue of this. He hated what he was about to do. After carefully wiping all traces of Fat Chance's smeared thumbprints off the folder with a handkerchief that he promptly threw away, Clay had scanned the summary report for main points. Auto accident six weeks ago at dusk. Bridge abutment. One dead, Susan Cannon, good but not bestselling writer of inspirational novels. One survivor, husband and beneficiary, Henderson Cannon. Multiple injuries—broken bones, dislocations, contusions, lacerations, punctures. A man severely injured and not yet out of the hospital, a man undoubtedly still grieving, a man to whom a hundred and eighty thousand dollars

probably meant nothing at this point in his life. And here I am, he thought, about to go through the pointless and cruel exercise of quizzing him about the accident just so the proper forms can be filled out in double triplicate. Clay had trouble just talking to strangers, but this kind of invasion . . .

He realized that he was still sitting in the car, engine running, trying to avoid the inevitable. For thirty seconds more he considered the possibility of driving back to Fat Chance's office and tossing the file on his desk in a gesture of righteous contempt. Then he heard what he feared was a new rattling cough from the engine and immediately cut off the ignition. "Necessity is indeed the mother," he sighed as he got out and locked up carefully, checking the doors twice. The maroon hood of his 1948 Studebaker shone with rich depths. He had owned the car for thirty-five years, had spent embarrassing sums maintaining and restoring her, had named her Brunhilde. He needed money, but even to think of selling her now . . . He wiped at an invisible spot on the paint with a new handkerchief, then headed for St. Ebenezer's visitors' entrance, pausing once behind his car to make sure he had lined it up precisely between the lines of the parking space.

He finally found Room 5501. "East Wing," the orderly had said with a faint smirk. West Wing it was, last room in West Wing. Clay had walked the entire lengths of the two fifth floor corridors to find that out, and now he was sweating slightly and unpleasantly. He pulled down his coat, straightened his tie, took a deep breath, and knocked softly.

No answer, but the sounds of the television filtered through the door. He knocked again and pushed the door open just enough to put his head into the room. Cannon was sitting up in his bed, still bandaged in places, sections of the *Wall Street Journal* spread around him. He was giggling at the television. On the screen the coyote was riding a rocket into a wall of red sandstone while the roadrunner beep-beeped across the desert highway. Another giggle.

Clay cleared his throat. "Mr. Cannon?" He said it twice more before Cannon heard and turned to him, apparently embarrassed and angry as he killed the sound of the television with his remote control.

"Why don't you try knocking?" he growled.

"I did. I'm sorry." Clay gave himself a mental kick in the pants for the apology. It was like saying "Thank you, officer," to the policeman who wrote

you a ticket. He had done that once, too. "I'm sorry to disturb you, that is," he added, trying to make some sense out of it. "I'm Adameus Clay, a claims representative from . . ."

Cannon giggled again. "What kind of name is Adameus?"

Clay shrugged and spread his hands as if in apology, looking for all the world as if he were smiling. "You may call me Adam."

"Claims rep, huh? Well, where the hell have you been? I knew the lawyer threat would work. You guys are trying to stiff me."

"No, Mr. Cannon, let me assure you that we are not. And please accept my apologies for the delay." Now I'm apologizing for Fat Chance, he thought. This just isn't worth it. "May I sit down?"

"Yes, you may sit down, Pops, but not in here. You go sit in accounts receivable and straighten up this bill."

Clay was frozen with his hand on the chair he had been pulling out, his unsmile transfixed as if nailed to his face. "I'm not sure I follow you, Mr. Cannon."

Cannon sank back onto his mountain of pillows. "Another nerd. You'd better follow me. I didn't pay outrageous premiums just to have you dance away when I have an accident. I know my rights, Pops. When I buy health insurance, I expect it to pay off when I need it."

"Mr. Cannon, I'm here about life insurance, not health. Your late wife's policy, sir. My condolences." Clay congratulated himself for maintaining his composure.

Cannon looked blank for a moment. "You're not from Mountain Valley Mutual?"

"No, sir. I'm from Acme."

"Oh. Oh. Well, why didn't you say so, Pops? Those guys at Mountain Valley haven't paid one penny on my bill here, and it's a bill, let me tell you."

Clay was suddenly in a hurry just to get it done and get out. "I hate to intrude on your hour of grief, Mr. Cannon, but I'm afraid I have a few questions to ask you."

"You insurance people are all alike, you know? Here I'm thinking that you might be ready to hand over the check, in person even, but no, you snivel in here with phony condolences and more questions. Is it about the accident?"

Clay still stood by the chair. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Forget it, Pops. Get out. I don't want to see that little balding head poke around my door again unless it's preceded by a hand with a check in it. I've been over that accident a dozen times. You've got reports, the police have reports, Mountain Valley has reports, all God's children got reports, and they've all got the same bottom line. I

want my money or I really will sue."

Clay didn't care if he did sue. He might enjoy seeing Fat Chance suffer a bit. But he did care about his hair, or what was left of his hair, especially with the twins. When they were twelve, he would be seventy, and he wanted at least to *look* young for them, but his hair had perversely begun thinning faster this year. So when Cannon made a reference to his little balding head, Clay looked almost angry, which meant he was furious. "There are some details, Mr. Cannon, that we need to check out." It was the only thing he could think of to sweep to his revenge.

"That's it, Pops. You're sued. You and Everest and everybody. Take your four eyes and get out of here."

"See you in court, Cannon," Clay said before stalking from the room. He'd heard it in a movie once. It sounded good now. But in the elevator it sounded not so good, and he did pour out Kent's torrent of abuse, but he aimed it at himself, muttering in spite of the quizzical faces behind him. So much for extra money, he thought. Well, at least when Fat Chance fires me, I can tell him off. So there is a good side to every situation.

But when he found that someone's bumper had taken a two inch wide strip of paint off

the driver's door before putting a double-fist sized dent in Brunhilde's front fender, he was convinced that the only side this situation had was an underside.

When the call came from Fat Chance two days later, it wasn't at all what Clay was expecting. Fat Chance wanted to know where the report was. No, Cannon hadn't called him, why should he? Well, being sorry wasn't good enough. The report was on his desk by Friday or Adam could pick up pocket change someplace else.

Clay was unaccountably pleased. He had expected to be fired and was in part looking forward to it, but now he found himself eager for the second chance. And secretly he was glad for the excuse to put aside his writing, which he could scarcely admit he was doing, even to himself. He thought his short fiction was good; publishers didn't. So now he was trying to write a hot pink romantic novel under a pseudonym, but he found the obligatory sex scenes embarrassing or amusing, and what he wrote, as he himself recognized the morning after, had all the seductiveness of a commencement address. To electrify the scenes, he was researching heaving bosoms, firm backsides, and the allure of the

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water- or sweat-drenched body on television commercials, and as long as he wrote exactly what he saw, the passages did seem to have some juice, but any embellishment on his part was viciously satirical. The need for money drove him on, but his pseudonym was Maress Beard, an anagram of "embarrassed." The novel's title was *Love Me Now, My Love*. Any excuse to put it aside was welcomed. Even Fat Chance.

So Clay for the first time approached his assignment with some eagerness. He wanted the paperwork done double quick now, and he would put in for three and a half hours even though the work would cost him six easy, just to stay on Fat Chance's good side. He'd had sort of an interview with Cannon; he had accident reports, insurance applications, even the newspaper account of the accident, so he could fill out most of the forms and fudge what he didn't know. He told himself that this was all a formality anyway. Acme would pay off, but only by the numbers.

Clay dropped the manuscript of *Love Me Now, My Love* into the bottom drawer and spread Acme's paperwork across his desk. He'd have to start all over, read thoroughly this time. He began with the ambulance report and was struck again by the conglomeration of Cannon's

injuries, wincing at each cold detail. The emergency room write-up was even worse. He put both reports aside. He'd get to them later.

He picked up Acme's own information, beginning with the application for Mrs. Cannon's insurance. It was dull reading, mostly statistical, the have-you-ever-had, is-there-a-history-of variety, but he read line by line, detail by detail, unable to break his scholarly approach to serious reading even for this. When he finished, he found himself chewing on two of the details—the policy was six months old; there were no other life policies on Mrs. Cannon with other companies.

Mountain? he thought, staring off blankly. Mountain? Something about Cannon and a mountain? Mountain Valley, of course, but there was something else. As he thought of Cannon, he found himself running his fingers through his thinning hair and he was suddenly angry. "Everest," he said aloud. Didn't Cannon say something about Everest? And wasn't that an insurance company? Life insurance or health?

He found Everest Insurance ("The Pinnacle of Protection") in the Yellow Pages. Even if Cannon had lied on his insurance application to Acme about not having other life policies, would that give Acme grounds

to negate the policy? And if it did, did Cannon deserve that kind of treatment from him? "Vengeance is petty, Adameus," he said as he finished dialing, but he didn't hang up.

He didn't get far, either. He could almost see the sneer on the secretary's face when she said, "We don't just give out information on clients to any Joe who calls, y'know, bub." She hung up before she heard his apology. Then he was angry again. Rudeness made him angry. There were no decent standards left. What had happened to courtesy, to respect? He called back. The same secretary answered.

"Hello," said Clay, lowering his voice and rounding his vowels, "I'd like to speak to someone about taking out a group health insurance policy. I run a small business, fourteen employees, and we're interested in . . ."

"I'm sorry, sir," she answered in a voice distinctly more polite now, "but we don't carry health. Now if your company needs life or fire or casualty . . ."

No, he told her, and thank you. She told him to have a nice day.

So, he thought. No health. Acme's file showed the health policy at Mountain Valley, the company Cannon had mentioned. Maybe he meant a man named Everest. He called

Mountain Valley and asked to speak to Mr. Everest. No one by that name. Just to be sure, he called Acme and Everest, asked both the same question, got the same answer. So perhaps Cannon *had* meant Everest Insurance, and perhaps he *did* have a life policy on his wife there. And maybe with other companies, too. For a moment Clay entertained the thought of murder, a diabolical plot to get rich from his wife's apparently accidental death. He imagined calling every insurance company in the area and finding that Cannon had a huge policy on his wife at each one. "Pops" brings murderer to justice. More important, Adameus Clay makes better than a year's salary in a week. Invest ten thousand dollars each for the twins now and they'd be able to go to college even if he were . . .

"Cut it out, Adameus," he muttered. "Five dollars an hour and you're being Walter Mitty here." But he went back to the police report anyway.

It was gruesome. The car had hit the bridge abutment almost head on, impact on the passenger side. The car was virtually sheared in half. Woman apparently dead on impact, thrown through the windshield into the concrete pillar. Male driver wearing seat belt, multiple injuries. There were no skid marks. Investigating officer says

mechanism of accident consistent with driver falling asleep at the wheel and drifting straight into abutment. Theory backed up later by victim interview. Victim claims to remember driving, then to remember waking up in hospital. Feels he fell asleep at the wheel.

There was more, but Clay wanted the reports he had seen earlier, the ambulance and emergency room reports with their lists of injuries. He found them. For the woman, no life support given at the scene. Man had to be extricated from the car with heavy tools and "jaws," whatever they were. The injuries were listed more specifically on the emergency room report, and Adam had to reach back into his own college physiology class to remember what all the words meant—open fracture of the left clavicle, fracture of the right olecranon process, anterior dislocation of right shoulder, fracture of ribs eight through ten left side, lacerated liver and spleen, ruptured bladder, crushed metacarpals on right hand, broken nose, laceration of scalp, face, and neck, crushed right ankle. Clay shuddered and fought nausea, almost feeling the pain in each part of his own body as he read the report. He rubbed his elbow fitfully.

No, he thought, there's no murder here. Death was riding

too close for murder.

He finished filling out the report as quickly as he could.

The next day, before his first class, he took the report to Acme. He found himself badly shaken by the descriptions of the accident and injuries. He'd had nightmares all night, filled with screaming brakes, splintering glass, twisting metal, bodies flying to pieces, blood. It took him fifteen minutes more than usual to get to Acme, certain that every other driver was out to get him.

He gave the ungrateful Fat Chance his work, took his seventeen dollars and fifty cents without grace, got back into Brunhilde, and crept to the university, parking at the far side of the lot. He usually ate lunch at home, but today he would have chanced the Pto-maine Tower, as the students called the dining hall, rather than drive again. But the twins needed food, too, so he reluctantly climbed back into Brunhilde, stood his briefcase in the passenger seat, buckled in, and took his chances in the streets. At the Winn Dixie he parked as far away from the other cars as he could, and even though he spent his seventeen fifty and then some, he had only one bag to show for it, full of junior meats and strained prunes and



the like, and the bag was heavy, so he was tired and irritated and sweating by the time he balanced it in front of his briefcase and strapped himself in again.

Driving was worse than ever. He felt absolutely paranoid until he finally saw his house two blocks away, and he was just feeling safe when some idiot in a jeep with a bumper made out of steel pipe jerked away from the curb and stalled out right in front of him. By all the laws of physics, he knew he couldn't stop in time, but his reactions were fast and instinctive—he slammed on the brakes, cut the wheel to the left, flung his right arm to the grocery bag, and hit the jeep.

He realized that someone was asking him if he were okay. He looked around. The jeep was mashed into his front end, steam hissed from his radiator, jars of baby food were on the dash, the floor, in his lap, strained prunes and tapioca pudding oozing into the carpet. He shook his head. His head hurt. "People in the jeep okay?" he asked.

"We're fine," said the teenager with the unbuttoned shirt at his window. "Are you okay?"

Pain shot through his right shoulder and elbow and lodged in his hand. He looked down at his hand and realized that something might be broken. Slowly he turned to face the

anxious boy. "Eureka," he said, his eyes watering with pain even as he smiled.

They gave him something for the pain after they took X-rays and punched, kneaded, prodded, and probed. He was glad that Ginger was in the emergency room with him, even more glad that she had ridden with him in the ambulance. He had been near hysteria, not from the pain or fear, but from the absurdity of it all—two blocks from home, his house in sight, his precious car bleeding water and anti-freeze and spouting steam, and him immobilized by the idiots from the jeep. He wanted to get home, to see the twins, to tell Ginger he was all right. He heard his own voice babbling, saw his left hand pointing to his house. "No sir, you stay right there, we've called an ambulance, don't move, you might hurt yourself, stay put, sir." A girl was crying somewhere. His frustration was blinding. Finally he made someone understand and someone ran to his house and got his wife. Only then had the sense of helplessness faded.

Now here in the hospital lobby it was back again, only slightly dulled by the painkiller. He held the phone away from his ear to protect his eardrum from Fat Chance's howling. "You're

a real pip, Adam, you know that?" The voice carried far in the room. Heads turned. "I know you're serious because you don't have a sense of humor. And if you're serious, you're nuts. Now why don't you go home, go to bed, and . . ."

"Marvyn, have you still got the report?"

"It's right here on my desk. I'm not touching it until Monday morning. I've got a big meeting now, Adam old chap, so I'm going to hang . . ."

"Just look at the injuries, okay? Just open the file and look. Don't they strike you as odd? Marvyn? Are you there, Marvyn?"

"You're off your doodle, Adam. You're bonkers. Goodbye."

Hearing the dial tone was something of a relief.

"He didn't believe you," said Ginger. It was not a question.

Adam didn't really respond to her remark until they were in the cab, and even then he talked as much to keep his mind off the fact that he was on the streets again as to discuss the problem.

"Well," he said. "Well."

"Well?" said Ginger, teasing.

"Well, he's probably right, Ginger. He deals with this sort of thing daily. I don't know anything about it. Imagine my reaction if he was to tell me I had

mistranslated a section of *Beowulf*."

"Were."

"What?"

"You said 'if he was,' Adam. You don't make that kind of mistake unless you're upset. Try to relax."

He lapsed into a long silence. Defeat settled like dust on his shoulders. He'd smashed his car. He'd hurt himself and frightened his wife. He'd missed his afternoon classes. He was underpaid, he hadn't saved, he couldn't sell his writing. He was too old for the twins, too old for Ginger, too old to drive, to teach, to think. There wasn't enough money, wasn't enough time, wasn't enough anything. And he'd made a fool of himself in front of Fat Chance—of all people.

"And I use the word loosely," he mumbled.

"What?" said Ginger.

"What?" answered Adam, looking up suddenly as if he'd been caught sleeping in class.

"What did you say, Adam?"

"Damn," he said, surprising even himself. "Driver, take us to 2607 Craig Road, please."

Dark eyes squinted in the rear view mirror. "That okay by you, lady?"

"Yes," said Ginger, and they sat in silence until the cab came to a halt.

"Wait," Clay ordered as he got out of the cab. The driver

shrugged and lit a bent cigarette.

Just act as if you know what you're doing, Clay thought as he lengthened his step into what he hoped was a purposeful stride toward Fat Chance's office.

"Marvyn still in, Miss Address?" he asked almost casually as he passed the desk and reached for the office door.

Miss Address half rose as if to stop him. "No, Mr. Clay. He's gone for the day."

"Fine," he said as he opened the door. "He said he'd leave a folder on his desk," and with that he was in the office. It wasn't a lie exactly, he told himself, any more than Marvyn's meeting. But at the sight of the desk he felt his confidence drain again. It was chaos, paper piled everywhere. Not a square centimeter of desk top was visible. He walked around the desk and stood at Fat Chance's chair, his eyes dancing furiously for the report. The secretary appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, Miss Address. Now I understand why my brother-in-law requires such a competent secretary." He waved his left hand vaguely, looking helpless. "If you'd be so kind . . ."

Miss Address allowed a smile to twitch at her lips. "Exactly what do you need, Mr. Clay?"

"The Cannon file, please."

She plucked it from the mess

with a dextrous flick of a magician's wrist.

"You amaze me, Miss Address. Marvyn would be lost without you, I'm sure."

Another twitch encouraged him.

"Indeed," he continued, "I dare say that he is often lost despite you?" He made it lilt like a question, this time intentionally, and received a genuine smile in return.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Mr. Clay."

"I'll pretend I didn't say it, Miss Address."

They allowed themselves a small laugh as they left the office.

"I hope you don't have much you need to do, Mr. Clay. Those reports can be so tedious."

"Not much, Miss Address." Just the name of the ambulance attendant, he thought. "Good day."

He was beaming as he got back into the cab. "Home, James," he announced.

The driver jerked his thumb at his ID. "That's Jimbo, Mac."

"Adam," said Ginger as she reached for his hand, "are you all right?"

"All right?" He kissed her cheek. "I was terrific."

**I**t didn't take long for Adam to feel his confidence drain yet once more. The ambulance that had picked up the

Cannons was based in DeWitt, in the next county, a rural county with miles of narrow country roads twisting away from the interstate. Too far for a cab. That meant hiring a sitter. It also meant riding in Ginger's '72 Volkswagen Beetle on those roads where traffic came at you just inches away, and the Bug lacked for Adam the comforting dead weight armor of excess steel. He spent a restless night and decided finally to go, shame winning over fear, because Hogan Lewis, the EMT he had reached, had changed his plans in order to meet with Adam the next morning, and Adam was too embarrassed to call back and cancel.

He survived the drive by concentrating on what he was after and on trying to discover exactly how he had gotten himself into this situation. Why was it so important to pursue this? Cannon's insult? Fat Chance's laughter? This is idiocy, he thought. He had no experience in these matters. Surely he could accept Fat Chance's opinion as valid. Good Lord, he thought suddenly. Is it that I'm seeking Marvyn's approval? The idea horrified him.

"Do you like your brother?" he asked, then realized how strange it must sound since he had said nothing at all for the last fifteen minutes.

Ginger kept her eyes on the

road. "Really beautiful country, don't you think?"

"Which one of you is the changeling?"

She smiled and patted his knee.

What he wanted, he finally decided, was a second opinion. He wanted to understand the mechanism of injury.

"Oh, yes, I remember that accident well," said Lewis over a second cup of coffee at his kitchen table. "We're a volunteer service in this county, Mr. Clay. Not enough action around here to support a paid service. We don't see as much as the city units do, thank God. That accident was one of the worst. I remember it too well."

"Did anything . . . do you think . . ." Adam broke off and stared at his coffee, glancing first to Ginger at his right before looking back at Lewis. "I don't know quite what to ask, Mr. Lewis. I've read the reports and the injuries strike me as unusual. But I'm not an expert in these matters."

"Neither am I. Yeah, lots of injuries, bad ones. But it was a bad wreck. You can't believe what the car looked like."

Adam swallowed and found it hard to swallow. "I'm sorry," he said. "This must be unpleasant for you."

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"It is," said Lewis. "Not real good for you, either, from the way you look."

Adam felt that Lewis was waiting for something from him, but he had no idea what it was. "I imagine these ambulance calls can be very trying."

Lewis shifted back in his chair. "Can be."

I'm losing him, thought Adam. What am I doing wrong? "Lots of blood sometimes?" He could think of nothing else to say, but that sounded terrible even as he said it.

"Sometimes," said Lewis.

Ginger's hand brushed Lewis's arm with the lightest of touches. "Mr. Lewis, I guess we should have made it clear that whatever suspicions we have are directed at the occupants of the car only." She met Lewis's eyes for a half second before adding, "Could I have some more coffee, please?" and she reached for the pot.

Lewis leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, and stared into Adam's eyes. "Not that time," he said. "Not *enough* blood that time."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Clay, you've got to picture what things are like. It's just getting dark. Winter then, remember. I'm sitting down right here, halfway through my supper, when the call comes in. We get out there, it's really dark, but there's headlights and

floodlights, the cops' blue lights flashing, our red and whites flashing, big clouds of exhaust fumes, and there's what might have been a car and what might have been people. Noise, dark, cold, adrenalin, death, okay? The woman was dead, anybody could see that right off. The ER doctor wouldn't even let us unload her. We took her right to the morgue. You can't get all of that out of you right away. Something bothered me later that didn't bother me then. There wasn't enough blood at the scene. There was blood around her, on her, but not enough." He paused a second. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Clay, I think she died some time before she went through that windshield."

Clay let his breath out slowly and loudly. "Thank you, Mr. Lewis. I thought that something was wrong here. It is quite a relief to hear you say that."

"No more than it is to me."

"Could I ask you about the husband? He . . ."

"Banged up really bad."

"Anything unusual about the injuries? I have a list here." He passed the emergency room report to Lewis.

Lewis read for a few moments in silence. "Thought that was right," he said softly.

"What, Mr. Lewis?" asked Clay.

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"Oh, I see where the broken ribs got the liver. That's what I thought in the field, but no way to tell for sure out there."

"Can you describe the mechanism of injury for the ones on that list? For the liver and ribs?"

"I can try. The guy was wearing his seat belt and shoulder harness way too loose. He'd smack into them hard. The harness could have gotten the ribs, or he might have had the belts so loose that he got a little of the steering wheel. Belt that loose could help that bladder rupture, too, especially if it's full. Broken left clavicle and, uh, yeah, these deep abdominal contusions—same thing, seat belt too high, shoulder harness too loose."

"Pardon me for saying this, but I thought you said you weren't an expert in these matters."

"A lot of this is textbook answers, Mr. Clay. And I saw that wreck. I *saw* it, understand?"

Adam nodded.

"Let's see," Lewis continued. "Crushed ankle probably from the car just buckling back on his foot. The passenger side was displaced almost six inches back. Lacerations from flying glass. Broken nose? Could be steering wheel, could be missile of some sort. Broken hand, same thing. Fracture of the olecranon process? Now that's harder. That's

this bone here, sticks out behind your elbow, part of the joint. Usually takes a direct blow or some strong leverage to break it. Something loose in the back seat, on the ledge, maybe, smacked it from behind. Dislocated shoulder, maybe whatever got his elbow. Maybe just impact. It was a hell of an impact."

"Have you ever connected the husband with your belief that Mrs. Cannon was dead before impact?"

Lewis looked uncomfortable. "Got to, don't you? But I don't see how."

"Have you ever fallen asleep at the wheel, Mr. Lewis?"

"Sorta nodded off once or twice. Hitting the shoulder woke me up."

"Where were your hands when you woke up?"

Lewis sat straighter, closed his eyes, and raised his hands. "On the steering wheel still," he said.

"So were mine, when it's happened to me. If Cannon went to sleep at the wheel, then I think that's where his hands would be, too. But that makes those injuries difficult to explain."

"Maybe he woke up."

"If I had been he and had waked up, I would have hit my brakes. There were no skid marks. I would have swerved. He didn't. Now, Mr. Lewis, would you find all of this easier

to explain if Mr. Cannon had hit that bridge on purpose? And would you find broken metacarpals, dislocated shoulder, and fracture of the olecranon process easier to explain if Mr. Cannon had been using his right arm and hand to prop up the body of his dead wife so that she would in fact go through the windshield and hit that abutment, thereby duplicating the expected mechanism of injury and mangling her beyond . . .”

“Of course,” whispered Lewis, sinking back into his chair as if suddenly tired. “That’s why his belts were so loose—so he could reach over. Her body smashed his arm into the dash on its way out. Why didn’t I see it before?”

“I didn’t see it, either,” said Clay, raising his bandaged right hand, “until it happened to me.” He winced at the pain in his shoulder and elbow and quickly added, grinning ruefully at Ginger, “With a bag of groceries, that is.”

“**Y**ou’re nuts, you know that? Fruitcake. Bananas.”

Fat Chance paused long enough to remove the bitten-off butt of his cigar from his tongue. Clay took advantage while he could.

“Let me lay it out for you, Marv.” He’d heard that the night before on a *Dragnet* re-

run. He found he was watching more cop shows. “It seems to me that you can’t lose here. You forward my report to your boss. One of three things happens. One—he follows up and I’m right and we prove it. You get part of the credit for saving the company big bucks. Maybe a promotion. Two—he follows up but we can’t get enough evidence to prove the theory. You’re still due for congratulations for hiring good people and for making the company sharper on elaborate fraud cases. Three—I am, as you say, a dessert plate. You blame me and can me and never have to see me again except at family reunions. At best you’re a hero. At worst I’m your goat.”

Fat Chance stared at Clay while absently picking bits of tobacco from his tongue. “You’re right,” he said finally. “Nuts, understand, but right.”

“Let me talk to him.”

“No way. I’ll send the report up.”

“If I’m wrong, he’ll have me to chew out in person. He won’t have to chew you to get me.”

Fat Chance hit his intercom. “Shirley, see if Mr. Carroll can see Mr. Clay. Tell him it’s about possible fraud. Buzz me when you know.”

“That’s Dr. Clay,” said Clay with a genuine smile, “but we’ll keep that a family secret, eh, Marv?”



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Clay deposited twenty thousand of his bonus in trust funds for the twins.

He spent something over three thousand dollars of the rest on a very friendly word processing system to help him write his torrid romance. He gave the rest to Ginger, insisting that she spend it on something frivolous. She had the dents and holes taken out of Brunhilde, had her repainted and polished, and parked her shining in the driveway as a surprise. The rest she invested.

Everybody was happy. Everest was happy, and paid him a thousand dollars, which was nice of them, if cheap. Mountain Valley Mutual offered Clay a job, which flattered and amused him, and which he politely declined. Even Fat Chance was happy. After Acme, Everest, and Mountain Valley Mutual had convinced Mrs. Cannon's parents that an exhumation would be wise, and after an autopsy found that the heart had been skewered clean through by a thin, round, sharp object, like an ice pick, and after Cannon had pled guilty to reduced charges, Fat Chance even threw his arm around Clay and said to his boss, "Yes-

sir, Mr. Carroll, real proud of this brother-in-law of mine. Threw him this case special. Knew if something smelled, he'd find it." And Clay had stood there, apparently smiling.

So everybody was happy, but Clay had been happiest longest of all. Almost from the first moment that he had edged into Mr. Carroll's chrome and glass office to make his pitch for fraud, he had known things were going to work out.

"How do you do?" he had said.

"My name is Adameus Clay."

"Adameus?" puffed Carroll.

"Don't you mean Amadeus?"

Clay shrugged apologetically. "My mother meant Amadeus."

"Did she, by thunder?" Carroll boomed. "Well, my name is A. Belk Carroll. My mother, bless her soul, named me for her favorite department store and her favorite brand name patent medicine. Can you guess what the 'A' stands for?"

Clay looked down at the letterhead on the report he was holding. "Acme?" he ventured.

"I've never forgiven her for that," Carroll said, "until now. Sit down, Adameus. I think we're going to like each other."

And they did.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

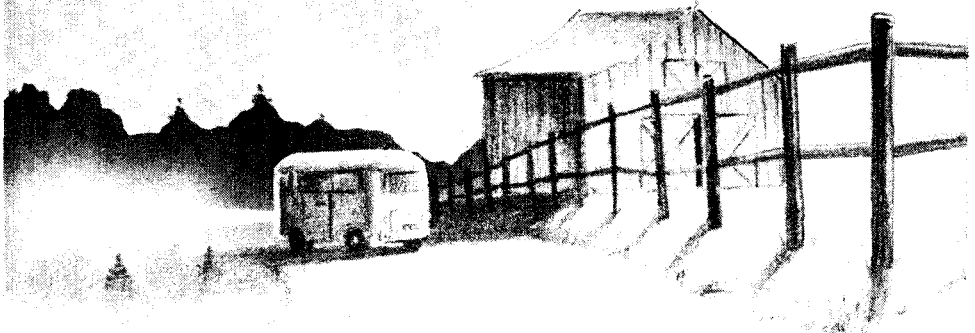
Shades of Hitchcock—and Du Maurier—of course, and yet we think there is some other mystery in the air here. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# Western Wind

by  
Janet O'Daniel



**T**he girl lay on her side, closed her eyes, and listened to the rain. The hay in the shed smelled sweet around her. One of nature's more inspired treats for the senses—dry, fragrant hay and summer rain on a shed roof.

*Illustration by James Regan*

And so it would have seemed now except that she was tied, her hands bound with soft bridle rope. Her jaw was sore, her whole head throbbing. The shed door was locked on the outside with a padlock. She had heard it click.



*Standing with reluctant feet where the brook and river meet. That was what her mother had said about her. It has to do with growing up, she had told Margaret. But I was never going to grow up, Margaret thought, remembering. I never wanted to.*

Maybe now I never will.

*He said I was already grown. Let her be, she's grown up, for God's sake. He said that over and over. She's a woman now, Grace. I hated him right from the first, she thought.*

Yet it was odd, how far re-

moved she felt from it all now. She could still remember the last day, weeks ago, when it had been peaceful and safe. If I'd known that was the last good day, she thought, would I have appreciated it more? Would I have done anything different?

She could see herself, or the girl she had been then, as she led the last two horses down the slope late that afternoon, into the pasture where the grass was tall and bright green with early summer growth. She could see herself sliding the loose leads from around their necks and slapping the horses through the gate, closing it behind them and fastening it with a loop of wire. Then she had walked along the line of fence that fronted the dirt road, examining it. Tomorrow, she remembered thinking, she would go over the rest of it—that part where the woods began. Danger could come from the woods.

She had had great faith in fences then.

She had turned back up the path after that, heading toward the house and stable. All the paths were part of the route the riders took—"Miles of Scenic Trails," according to the sign out at the end of the dirt road where the county road met it.

"We should repaint that," Grace, her mother, would often say, looking critically at the sign. "It's badly faded." And Margaret, feeling uneasy, would

say, "It's all right, though, isn't it? I mean, people know where we are."

Grace would shrug and push back the light hair that had blown across her face. "I suppose . . ."

At the top of the path Margaret had paused, that last day, to look back down the slope at the eight horses in the lower meadow. They stood knee-deep in grass, heads lowering to it, tails switching. Then she turned toward the house. It was small and, like the sign, in need of paint. Its clapboards had grown gray. The red rambler at the back door hid the propane tanks. Margaret opened the door, a wood-frame screen door with a spring to pull it shut and a hook to fasten it. It made a squeak when she entered.

"What's that smell?" she demanded.

"An omelet," her mother said. "I put herbs in it. And we still have asparagus. I picked strawberries today, too, so we'll have biscuit shortcake."

"I'm starved."

Grace smiled at her. She was wearing a white apron over her red shirt and her jeans, and her face was pink from the heat of the stove. Her blonde hair was pulled back and tied with a red ribbon. Grace was at her best when cooking—perhaps, Margaret thought, because it was the thing she liked best.

Margaret looked around the

kitchen, which was painted yellow and was the safest place she knew. Yellow was the safest of all colors, she thought. They had painted it the year before, almost as soon as Grandfather's funeral was over. "I hate the smell of the stuff!" the old man had railed at them from his sickbed when they had suggested painting it earlier. "Go ahead, if you want to kill me." So of course they had not. But after he was dead months later, and after the neighbors had left—strangers with polite, staring faces—they had hurried to change their clothes and get out the paint that had been put aside. They had worked far into the night on it, and when they had finished, had cleared a corner of the sheet-covered table and eaten baked beans and cole slaw and lemon layer cake with seven-minute icing, all donated by those same neighbors.

"Not much imagination," Grace had commented, "but very kind of them." And they had grinned together, feeling their freedom.

On that last safe day they sat across from each other over the blue and white tablecloth and ate the yellow omelet and tender asparagus stalks. As she ate, Margaret counted the cookbooks that stood on a shelf to the right of the sink. There were fourteen of them—all greasy, all thumbled. At the end

of the shelf was a book of poetry. Often Grace read from it, standing beside the stove and stirring. Sometimes she read aloud, when she knew the poem was one that Margaret would like—especially those that were apt to have horses in them. Alfred Noyes, for instance: "Back he spurred like a madman, shrieking a curse to the sky" was a line Margaret loved. And Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners" (" 'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller"), which always made the small hairs on her arms stand up.

"I have to go to the feed store tomorrow," Grace said. "So you'll have to stay home and wait for Mr. Pearce. It's his day."

"All right." Margaret did not mind Mr. Pearce, the blacksmith. He was one of the safe ones, an old man with strong knotty hands and startling false teeth. He came each month and looked after the horses' feet.

"When you get your license that's going to be your job, going for the feed, Miss Maggie," Grace said, smiling at her. "If the truck holds out that long."

Margaret's heart lurched as she prayed the truck would hold together because they needed it so badly, and then prayed it would explode and fly apart one day as it stood parked beside the stable, because getting a license meant taking a test—sitting beside some criti-



cal stranger who would judge her.

"Ready for shortcake?" Grace asked.

The biscuits were little white puffs with butter melting over them, and the strawberries were rubies. Over the top they put sweet cream that they had to scoop out of the pitcher with a spoon.

The day had had a perfection about it, from the horses in the new grass to the jewelled shortcake. Nothing that could have been improved upon, Margaret thought. It was only after that that the danger came.

**S**he remembered that she had brought the horses up from the field early the next morning to have them ready for Mr. Pearce.

"I won't be long," Grace had said, climbing into the truck.

Margaret nodded and waved her off, watching the truck all the way down the dirt road to the county hardtop. When the noise of the motor had died away, she could hear only the grainy chewing of the eight horses behind her in their stalls, where all eight heads were bent to their feed boxes. That, and the circling cry of the wind.

I wouldn't live except on a hilltop, Margaret thought.

Presently she took a fork and barrow and went through the stable's rear door into the riding ring. Beginners and small

children used the ring, and it was where Grace gave lessons. Margaret scooped manure and raked the hard earth into tidiness. She had just finished the job when she heard the blacksmith's truck rattling up the road. His truck was as old as their own but in better repair. "My nephew keeps after it," old Mr. Pearce had explained to them. "I only know about horses." It was one of the reasons she did not mind him.

Margaret hurried out to the front of the stable. The truck had already pulled up, and the door was opening. Something about that door opening struck Margaret with a chill. It was too abrupt, too businesslike. Mr. Pearce always edged out of his truck in a cautious, old-man way. She stood rigid and watched as a stranger got down and turned to her.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," Margaret answered, but she was not sure she spoke aloud. The stranger was a tall man, broad-chested and bulging in his worn jeans and plaid shirt. He wore run-over boots and a Western hat, which he took off now and tossed back into the truck. He had light brown hair, thinning a little at the temples, but she thought that he was not old even so.

"Where's Mr. Pearce?" she whispered.

He gave her a curious look.



"He died—didn't you hear? I'm his nephew, Eddie James. I been trying to keep up with his calls."

She gasped. "But he was here last month!"

His gray eyes went over her, looking cold and dangerous. "Well, he died since last month."

"We didn't hear."

"Yeah. Well." He went around to the back of the truck, opened the tailgate, and pulled the anvil forward to rest on it. "How many horses you got—eight, is it?"

"Yes. Eight."

"Any problems?"

"No. I don't know. I guess not."

His eyebrows went up and he reached into his shirt pocket for a package of gum. "Well? You want to start bringing 'em out?" He took two sticks of gum and unwrapped them, jammed them both in his mouth, and then made a gesture with the package toward her. She shook her head and fled into the stable.

He had a portable radio on the seat of the truck, and as he worked he listened to country music, humming along with it and shifting the gum about in his mouth.

"This fella looks pretty good," he said of Royal, the black gelding which was Margaret's own horse. "You the one keeps his feet clean?"

"Yes."

"Been hurt though. What

happened to his leg? Barbed wire?"

"He put his foot through it."

"Ooh doggies. Looks like it was pretty tore up. You have to have the vet for him?"

"We fixed it."

"Who's we?"

"My mother and I."

"You two run this place?"

"Yes."

"No daddy?"

"No." She hated letting him in on their secrets.

"I come here from Texas last year," he said. "Come for a visit and stayed on, helping Uncle Ned. Then I got me a little business going—repairing cars and like that. Little shop out back is all. Then he died on me. I don't know. Might stay on here, might go back home." He trimmed, cut, pounded. The morning, which had been so silent, with only the wind and the horses, had grown nervous with sound. The clanking, metal on metal, the snap of his gum, the blare of the radio.

"One more heartache doesn't matter, I still love you—"

He was an intrusion, filling all the space around him. She would rake up after he was finished, Margaret thought. Clear away all the calloused hoof trimmings and scraps, then rake over the tire tracks, too, to erase him.

Grace was not surprised, when she returned, to see the stranger there.

"They told me in the feed store," she said. "I'm so sorry about Mr. Pearce." She gave Margaret a quick, anxious look.

Eddie James told her about Texas and about his shop. "Might stay on, I don't know. Might go back."

The wind was blowing a loose strand of hair across Grace's cheek. She caught at it and gave a little laugh. "Is it hard to decide?"

"Yeah. Well, right now, see, I'm trying to do two jobs." He was looking at the strand of hair.

He was done in four hours; it was faster than old Mr. Pearce had worked. "I'll write you a check," Grace said.

"No hurry. I'll help you unload those feed bags."

"Oh—goodness, we can do that."

"They're fifty pounds each!" he said. "That's no job for a woman."

Margaret shrank back into the shadows as he began taking the feed bags out of the truck, lifting them easily and swinging them down, ripping them open, and emptying them into the big metal drums in the feed room. He filled the stable with his huge shoulders, his powerful swinging arms. Each time he came through the doorway, he blotted out the light for an instant.

"You two could sure use some help around this place," he said.

That afternoon Margaret rode Royal out to the edge of the field where the woods were. The fence seemed sound enough, but beer cans had been tossed there. There were new houses on the tract over beyond the woods. Boys rode dirt bikes there—she heard their noise all day sometimes. And they drink beer in our woods, she thought, and shivered.

That evening as they sat at the kitchen table, Grace said, "Sometimes I think we're too much in the habit of being to ourselves up here. I guess we got that way when we had Grandpa to take care of." Some hard kernel of loyalty seemed to keep her from saying what they both knew—that her father had been miserly and righteous. The only good about him had been love of his horses. And that had not begun to make up for all the rest. It wasn't that he was ever really mean to me, Margaret thought. It was the way he treated *her*—the things he said to her. *You sure fixed it up real good for me. Fixed it so I can't never hold my head up again when I go into town. You took care of that, all right—*

"I think we're fine just the way we are," Margaret said quickly.

In the night she was thirsty and went to the kitchen for a drink. When she turned away from the sink, she saw that Grace had left her book of po-

etry on the counter lying open, resting on its limp and overworked spine. Margaret carried it to the night light stuck in the wall socket. In the dim light she read, "Western wind, when wilt thou blow, that the small rain down can rain? Christ, that my love were in my arms, and I in my bed again!"

She closed the book carefully and put it on the shelf.

**E**ddie James was back in mid-July. This time he was in a battered blue van.

"What happened to the truck?" Grace asked.

"Got sold right out from under me, along with the house and the property—everything. All but the tools. New owners come in yesterday."

"Who sold it?"

"Uncle Ned's daughter in California. Did it through an agent here. It all went to her, even though she never cared a damn for him when he was alive—even to write. So I'm heading home to Texas. Just thought I'd stop and see to your horses before I left."

"That was very kind of you," Grace said.

Later Margaret saddled Royal and left the two of them examining the latch on the riding ring gate. "I'll put a stronger bolt through there," Eddie James was saying. Margaret rode Royal down the hill and

across the fields, following the riding trails all the way to the small stream that cut across their property. When she thought she had been gone long enough, she went back. The blue van was still parked by the stable.

She found Grace standing at the stove, beating Hollandaise with a whisk. She wore a blue cotton skirt and sandals and her hair was loose around her shoulders. Her bare legs looked long and brown. Margaret stared at her.

"I asked Eddie to stay for dinner," Grace said. "He did so many things to help. He fixed Starfire's door so it works beautifully. He's having a look at the pump now."

Margaret went into her own room without speaking. She changed into a clean T-shirt and brushed her hair so fiercely her scalp hurt. Later that night she lay awake long after she had gone to bed, hearing the voices, waiting for the sound of the van starting up, but it never came.

"He's going to give us a hand—just for a while," Grace said in the morning as Margaret went to the window and looked out. The van was still there, still parked in the same spot. "He can sleep out there—" Margaret spun around and Grace looked quickly at her coffee cup.

"Where is he now?"

"Repainting the sign," Grace said.

**E**ddie James seemed to fill every private corner of their lives after that.

It was Eddie who was responsible for the new horses coming to board. He had heard about three of them owned by people in the big housing tract. Their owners had been delighted to find stabling so close. "And you got those empty stalls just sitting there," Eddie had pointed out. "You could get a hundred and fifty a month easy for the three—maybe two hundred. Pay your whole feed bill—especially if your grass holds out good over the summer."

They took riders daily now instead of only on weekends. "Why not?" Eddie had said, and had added it to the sign. "Daily 8-5." Many who came were strangers, city people adventuring in the country or newly moved into the area. Margaret watched with scorn as they mounted and thrust their toes down in the stirrups instead of up, their two hands clutching at the reins, their shoulders hunched. Eddie James would smile his country-boy smile at them. "I just wonder, ma'am, if you wouldn't feel a little more sure of yourself if you was to have a couple of lessons. Ten dollars an hour, and you'd be surprised—I hope you don't

mind my mentioning it—"

They never minded. They smiled back at him as he adjusted their stirrups, and they signed up for lessons.

One day Margaret arrived at the stable to find that he had rented out Royal. "That's my horse!" she shouted. "You had no business letting somebody ride him!"

"Why not? Has to earn his keep, doesn't he? Same as the rest?" And when Royal came back, sweating and winded, "It don't hurt a horse to sweat, kid. Just walk him out. He'll be all right."

Once a party came, renting six horses and asking for a guide. Grace took them over the trails and kept an eye on the inexperienced riders. When they returned, she was in the lead, sitting her horse lightly, laughing and talking, a little wind blowing her hair about and pressing her shirt over her breasts. Eddie James was watching her, too, Margaret saw.

The customers who came to ride were featureless—white blurred faces without identities. It was easy to keep them that way, Margaret discovered. All she had to do was squint a little and focus on a spot just past their heads. It was the same method she used when she disposed of a dead mouse or bird that the cat had left. All the voices were the same, goose-

like, gabbling. Laughter was tinny or rasping—never real.

Then one day she noticed someone. Saw him in three dimensions, saw that he had depth and flesh and substance. A man leaning against the hitching rail outside the stable, where riders mounted and dismounted. He stood with his weight on one foot, his arms folded in front of him. He was looking at her.

"Hi there," he said, and smiled.

She saw a yellow haze around him—like sunlight. And safety.

"Hi," she answered, or thought she did.

"I didn't want to disturb you," he said. "You were far away somewhere."

She said nothing, and he gave a faint shrug. "Most people do too much talking anyway, don't they?"

She busied herself picking up a lead rope that someone had tossed down, but she was feeling an inner excitement at what he had said, at the revelation it implied. Someone else who knew what she knew. He did not seem to mind when she did not answer.

"I bet you're the one I should ask about a horse," he said. "You look to me as if you'd know. Which one should I pick to ride?" He glanced at three horses tied in a grassy corner a short distance away. Margaret's look flew to Royal, who

was brought out daily with the others now, much as she hated it.

"The black?" he said lightly. "It's the one I would have picked, too. He's a handsome fellow." He paused and turned back to her. "He's your horse, isn't he?"

Margaret looked at him. His eyes were blue—deep and soft. His yellow hair curled around his ears and fell across his forehead. "Yes," she said, sure this time that she spoke aloud. "He's mine."

Grace came hurrying over then. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, Mr.—Beckwith, is it?"

"Yes—Tom, please." The blue eyes turned to Grace and lingered there.

"I didn't mean to keep you waiting, but those last two riders needed some reassurance. You've read the rules posted on the door? No galloping the horses, no reckless riding. And you're familiar with the trails? I always mention these things the first time—" She broke off apologetically, and he raised a hand.

"Perfectly okay," he said. "And I didn't mind the wait. This young lady and I were talking."

Grace glanced at Margaret, startled, and Margaret said quickly, as if it were a normal thing, "He's going out on Royal."

From then on Margaret saw it all as a big square. In books, she knew, such matters were

often described as triangles—two men and a woman—but this was different because there was a fourth angle, with her sitting at its apex, watching the other three, Tom Beckwith, Grace, and Eddie James. And there could be no mistaking it; from that first day when she had seen Tom's look following every move Grace made, it was obvious he was in love with her. Once it would have terrified Margaret with its implications of passion, surging blood, and dark desire, all conspiring to violate the separateness of their lives. But Tom Beckwith was different. From the first she had known that he was not one of the others.

He came often to ride—several times a week—and always he found time to chat with her before going out on Royal. He had less chance to talk to Grace, and that was because of a looming, proprietary manner that Eddie James had adopted. He could see the situation, too, Margaret guessed. He'd have been blind not to. At every turning Eddie managed to insinuate himself between Tom and Grace. "I'll lengthen those stirrups on Royal," he would say curtly. Or, "Mrs. Miller's waiting for her lesson, you know." As if it were his stable and Grace his hired hand, Margaret thought angrily.

One morning she heard Eddie's voice as soon as she woke

up. Its powerful, insistent tones overrode Grace's quiet ones. They were in the kitchen; Margaret could hear cups touching saucers. She got up and dressed, listening.

"If you're going to make the place pay, you oughta have another couple of horses. Blossom's reliable but she's getting old. Foxy's a good horse, only he needs an expert to control him—you can't give him to a kid. And when a crowd shows up on a weekend, you have to turn some away."

Margaret edged into the kitchen and slipped into her place at the table. Grace threw her a quick smile. Then she returned to Eddie, but listening, not speaking. Her eyes were troubled and restless.

"You're making enough money now to swing it," he said, ignoring Margaret. His heavy muscles filled his plaid shirt. Small hairs grew on the backs of his fingers. Margaret stared at them as he lifted his cup and drank. She heard him swallow. "Why the hell not do a little investing? Why don't we take a trip over to Martingale Farm? See what old man Martin's got for sale? His reputation's good, what I hear."

Grace looked worried. "I just don't know. Maybe I should. But I worry about spending the money."

"It's an investment. To make the place more profitable."

"We don't care about profit!" Margaret burst out.

Eddie's mouth drew to one side as he looked her up and down. "Oh, don't you now. That's real good to know when the taxes and the electric bills come due."

Grace said gently, "Margaret doesn't understand all that."

"Why not?" he demanded. "She's old enough to. She's damned near a grown woman."

"She just means—it's our home. And we don't care about making a lot of money. Just staying as we are." Grace's eyes apologized, pleaded with him.

"Well, how long can you do that? How long will those eight horses last? Any business, you got to make investment." He clanked his cup into its saucer. "Look, how about this? Why don't we ride over there to Martingale Farm tomorrow and spend some time looking around—we won't rush it. Maybe we don't even decide right off." He hesitated, then added, "We could take in a movie in Dorset before we come home. You never go anywhere. She can handle the stable for one afternoon, can't she?" He jerked his head toward Margaret. She felt, at the gesture, reduced to a cipher.

Grace's mouth was growing tight with worry. "She could, of course, but I wouldn't want to leave her here alone."

"Why the hell not?" he ex-

ploded. "Isn't she sixteen or damned near it? My God, I was working on a road construction gang when I was sixteen. Why couldn't she manage for one afternoon?"

But Grace was shaking her head, and the tight knot that had formed inside Margaret began to untangle itself. Grace would never leave her.

"What the hell are you scared of?" he asked. Then, more calmly, "Oh, Jesus, all right then. Let her come with us. You can call up and cancel the riders for one day."

"No! I don't want to come!" Margaret shouted. She thought of being crowded into the cab of the truck with that voice, those bulging thighs, those huge rough hands with their hairy fingers.

There was silence for a moment. Then he said, still ignoring Margaret, "It's time she got to know something about the world. She's scared as a rabbit."

Grace looked beaten. Margaret's heart ached for her.

"You stop it!" she cried out. Grace put out a hand to silence her.

"I do appreciate all you've done, Eddie," Grace said. "And you're probably right about the horses, too. Wouldn't you go for me and look at them? We'll talk about all those other things another time. I just can't do everything at once. It's going to take me a little time to change."



The word *change* had a clanging, ominous sound. Contemplating it, Margaret lost a bit of the conversation. Then she heard Eddie say, "All right, I'll go. I'll look them over, at least."

"Thank you, Eddie." There was more talk, but she lost that, too, in the wonder of what she saw ahead. A whole day without Eddie James's presence.

Later, as she was making her bed, Grace came into her room.

"You mustn't mind what Eddie says," she began. "He means it for the best."

Margaret pulled the spread up over the pillows and Grace went around to the other side to help. "He sees things a little differently from the way we do, that's all."

"A little," Margaret said, and would have said more except that she did not want to add to Grace's unhappiness. What does it matter how he sees things? she wanted to ask. They came around to the foot of the bed and Grace hugged her. "You're my little cricket," she said. "And the trouble is you're standing with reluctant feet."

"What's that mean?"

"You know—it's from a poem I read you once. 'Standing with reluctant feet where the brook and river meet.' It's about growing up."

"Oh, that."

"Yes—but things do change, baby. It can't be stopped." The worry still lingered in her voice

and her eyes. Margaret wondered if it would be difficult to kill Eddie James. She began to think how it might be done.

That afternoon she took Royal out and went for a ride down the slope, along the dirt road, all the way to the woods. It was some time since she had checked the fence there. She looked for breaks and weak spots and evidence of intrusion. She was relieved to see that it looked safe still. When she turned back, a shadowy form loomed up in front of her and her heart thumped with fright.

"Hey there!" A cheerful voice, no rough edge, not threatening.

"Oh." She felt the panic subside. "I didn't know you were riding today."

"Last minute impulse," Tom Beckwith explained.

"I'd have left Royal behind for you if I'd known."

"That's all right. He's your horse, not mine. Blossom's okay—not too spirited, but a good old girl." He patted the horse's neck. He sat easily, one hand holding the reins loosely, one resting on his thigh. They turned back together and started along the road, walking their horses, and for a time did not speak. Margaret thought, I can bear it, being with him. He doesn't mind my not talking every minute. After a long time he said, "Is that one of your special places—in the woods there?"

She kept her eyes on Royal's

ears. "No. I don't like it much in there. But I go to look around and see that the fence is okay."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"They ride dirt bikes in the woods there—they've made trails. Boys—you know."

"Boys from your school?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't have much to do with the kids at school." She glanced at him and saw that he was looking around at the roadside, thick with dusty Queen Anne's lace, purple loosestrife, and tall mullein spires, and then beyond to where the hills rolled back and two hawks soared and glided.

"You live in your own world, don't you?" he said softly. "I don't blame you—it's a beautiful one."

She did not answer, but she knew he understood. No one but Grace had ever understood.

Presently he said, still in that quiet way, "Does that fellow Eddie live at your place?"

"He has a van, out by the stable. He lives there." She did not mention the footsteps at night.

"Is he a sort of hired man?"

"Yes, sort of."

"I wondered because he seems to—take charge a lot. I mean, he's always around."

Margaret knew what he was saying. Someone like Tom, unused to pushing himself forward, would find it hard to get past Eddie James's muscular presence. She was quite certain that if only he could, he and

Grace would get along—they were the same sort of person. For a moment she thought of the three of them, Tom, Grace, and Margaret, living on the hilltop in the little house, caring for the horses, watching the seasons come and go. Surprisingly, it seemed not such a bad picture.

"He'll be away tomorrow," she said suddenly. She could feel his sharpening attention. "He's leaving early for the Martingale Farms over past Dorset, to look at horses."

"I see," he said.

In the night she heard a door opening and closing, heard the footsteps, the low voices. She turned her head into the pillow and pulled the covers up, wanting to shut them out. Wanting even more not to look at the wall that separated her room from Grace's, for fear she might see through it.

There was reassurance in the morning. A clear yellow sunrise full of shining and glitter, the world reborn, all omens good. She made her bed before going in to breakfast, taking particular care to square the blankets at the corners, to place the pillows straight, making it all true and safe. By the time she finished, she heard the pickup truck leaving, and only then did she go out to the kitchen.

That was only this morning, Margaret thought, twisting as she lay on the floor of the shed. How many hours ago? She had lost track, but she knew it was today. She moved her bound wrists painfully and thought of that neat bed, still unslept-in. The rain was coming harder now, not gently but with force, pounding on the shed roof. Wind was driving it, and there was still thunder. She could no longer see lightning because the window in the shed was covered with stacked bales of hay. She could feel the swelling in her face where his fist had struck her.

**T**om Beckwith had arrived earlier than usual that morning. "You two seem to have your hands full," he said. His face had a smiling, eager look. "Instead of riding, maybe I'll stick around and help out." Grace assured him it was not necessary, but he did anyway. All day he was there, leading horses in and out, helping riders to mount, adjusting stirrups, talking in his quiet way. He was a reassuring presence, lending a hand with anything that needed doing, and always anticipating it. There was a smooth, seamless quality about the day. It seemed to Margaret a blessed relief to be without Eddie's hulking presence, the rasp and abrasion of his voice.

It was after five when the last riders left. Grace and Tom leaned against the hitching rail and Margaret stood in the stable doorway, all of them watching the shadows grow longer. It was a soft afternoon, turning lavender now, with gold on the rims of the clouds. Margaret willed it to stop in a freeze-frame and for the pickup bearing Eddie James never to turn up the road toward the house.

"How about a ride before we put the horses away?" Tom suggested. "Just us three?"

Margaret's look went quickly to Grace. She saw the hesitation, knew that Grace too was thinking about the truck and Eddie. Then Grace's chin tilted slightly upward and she laughed and said, "Why not? That would be fun."

"I'm too tired," Margaret said quickly. "But you two go. I'll get started with the feeding and watering."

"You sure, Maggie?" Grace said, but not putting up much argument, and Tom said, "We won't be long."

Margaret watched them as they rode off down the slope, across the dirt road in the direction of the creek. There was a big willow that grew there near the water, and a soft grassy place under it. Sometimes Margaret rode Royal there, walking him into the water to let him drink. Watching now, she saw how close together their two

horses stayed. She started unsaddling the other six, brushing them, fetching feed in buckets, finally leading them down to the pasture and closing the gate on them. It was odd, she reflected, how she didn't mind sharing Grace with him. Perhaps it was because he never made her feel left out.

She was back at the house when she saw them returning, still far away, two small figures in the twilight. At the same moment she heard the distant roar of the pickup coming in from the county road turnoff. She stood at the screen door and watched the dust move along the dirt road and up the slope to the house. A thumping panic started up inside her, but satisfaction was mixed with it; she had helped engineer something that Eddie James could do nothing about. She watched as the truck pulled up and he got out. Then she retreated from the doorway and busied herself getting a drink at the sink while he came banging in, dusty and sweaty. He let the screen door slam shut behind him.

"Hi, kid." He gave her a curt nod and looked around the kitchen. "Where is she?" he said. Not even using her name. She. He crossed to the refrigerator and opened it, took out a can of beer and slammed the door shut. He plucked off the can's metal tab and tossed it on the counter. Then he tipped the

can up and drank. "Where's your ma?" he asked.

"She went riding."

"By herself?"

"No, not by herself." He had not seen them, then. Something sang in Margaret's ears. "With that Tom Beckwith."

He paused, the beer can in his hand, and stared at her. Then he moved to the screen door and looked out into the dusky young evening. His free hand rested on his hip. She saw him watching, saw the look of his body change slowly, all the muscles of his back growing rigid. The hand that was on his hip turned into a clenched fist. Margaret slid open the drawer near the sink and took out a kitchen knife, the one Grace always took care to sharpen. She slipped it under her shirt and went on looking out the window. She saw what he had seen—Grace and Tom moving into the stable yard, unsaddling their horses and feeding them, then leading them down the slope to the pasture. They returned and she heard Grace's laugh, then the sound of a car starting up.

Grace avoided looking directly at Eddie as she entered the kitchen and moved to the sink to wash up and then to tie on her apron. "Goodness, but we were busy today," she said. "How did it go over at Martingale? Did you see anything good?"

He went to the refrigerator

for another can of beer, not answering. The tab clinked on the counter and he said, "What was that guy doing hanging around here?"

"Just helping out. He gave us a hand with the riders this afternoon."

"Then stuck around to get paid."

Grace's cheeks flamed red but she did not answer.

"I don't like him hanging around you," he said.

It hung in the air between them, sharp as a blade, sharp as the knife wedged precariously under Margaret's shirt, but Grace did not take it up. Instead she said mildly, "For goodness sake, Eddie. He was just being helpful, that's all."

Margaret felt as if her body would burst and fly in all directions, but she held in. She imagined her blade stabbing Eddie James to the heart.

"I don't trust guys like him," he muttered, but Grace said quickly, "Tell me about the horses."

Margaret saw the muscles of his jaw working as he clenched it tight, but after a time he said stiffly, "Well, there was a couple there I thought didn't look too bad—"

The precarious peace lasted through the meal, but something was building, Margaret thought. And in the night air something was building, too. Heavy, sluggish currents moved

in through the screen door. Grace turned on the small kitchen radio. There was music, and then a voice talking of fronts shifting, of rain, heavy at times, and locally intense thunderstorms.

"I'd better bring the horses up from the field," Margaret said.

Eddie, leaning over his plate, said through his chewing, "A little rain won't hurt 'em."

"Roy's afraid of thunder and lightning. That time he ran his leg into the barbed wire it was thundering and he was scared."

"We should have replaced that bit of fence," Grace said worriedly. "It's no good around horses—"

"Well, if he's got any sense he's learned his lesson," Eddie said. "Not that horses are very bright about anything but food. Finish your supper, kid."

Margaret cast a look of helpless rage at Grace, but Grace only gave a tiny shake of her head.

The argument came later and Margaret could hear snatches of it through the wall. A guy like that . . . making a fool of yourself . . . if you can't see . . . And then a lot of swearing. Presently there was a slamming of doors and then the sound of a motor starting up. But not the pickup, Margaret noticed. The van. Was he leaving then—maybe for good? Something inside her buzzed

and soared at the thought. She crept out of bed, feeling the heavy air of the building storm, hearing the thunder that crept closer.

She dressed quickly, pulling on her jeans and T-shirt. After a moment's hesitation she stuck the knife in her belt. No matter how much she might will him to be gone for good, he might come back. She had to be ready. If she hurried, she could beat the rain, bring Royal up from the pasture and have him safe in the barn before it started. As she passed her mother's door she heard a small sob, but she ignored it. Things would soon be right again. Things gibbered and gnawed in the dark, but morning made them right again.

She crept out of the house quietly and ran down the slope. The night was dark, waiting for the storm. When the lightning flashed, it became a bleached-out moonscape. She felt strong and full of purpose and unafraid of the storm. There was nothing in it that could hurt her. Down at the corner of the field, just inside the gate, stood the small shed where hay was stored. She would stop there and pick up a lead rope. Roy would be impossible to manage without one.

The padlock was hanging open, the door slightly ajar. Had she left it that way earlier? She tried to remember. But the storm was coming closer; she

had to hurry. She pushed into the shed and reached in the dark for the hook where the lead ropes hung. A hand closed over hers. She gave a small, gasping scream. Thunder swallowed the sound.

"Margaret!"

She stopped struggling; the hand released her.

"Tom?"

"I'm sorry I frightened you. I didn't know who it was coming in."

"Oh." She felt weak and shaky from fright. "Is something wrong? How come you're here?"

"I was worried about you and your mother. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Why? What do you mean?"

"I saw him leave in that van of his—going like hell. I came back because I was afraid he might be sore about today — about my being here. I was afraid he might—do something. What about you? What did you come out for?"

"I'm going to bring Royal in before the storm hits." She reached up again for the rope.

"Wait," he said.

"I have to hurry. It's starting to rain." She took down the rope and started out the door. His hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. She stared at him curiously, but in the dark she could not make out his features. "I have to go," she said stubbornly.

"Wait. I have to think for a

minute," he said. Lightning flashed and she saw his face. Calm and thoughtful. "I have to decide how to do this. And I have to be sure he's coming back. He's got to get the blame for it."

"The blame—for what?" she whispered. Dryness crept up in her throat.

"For killing you. It's got to look right."

Another flash of light showed his face plainly—not twisted with hate, not dark with anger. Bland and calm as ever. But thoughtful. He was figuring out a problem. Margaret trembled with sudden cold. She made a lunge for the open doorway, but he was too quick for her. He slammed it shut and held her by both wrists. The rope she had been holding fell to the floor. He let her go and leaned over to pick it up. As he did so, Margaret grabbed the knife from her belt and struck out with it. She heard his startled yell of pain, but she knew by the way it felt that the knife slid along his neck harmlessly, making no more than a shallow gash. He seized her and struck her hard with his clenched fist. The blow landed on her jaw and stunned her for a moment, long enough for him to wrap the rope around her tightly and bind her arms together behind her back. He flung her down on the floor. Her head hit hard against it. She heard the door close, the

padlock click. The sound of the rain grew faint, then stopped.

She awoke to fear, but she had done that often before. Only at once, in the moment of waking, she knew that this time was different. For several minutes she lay there, hearing the storm again, feeling sore, and in a curious, disconnected way trying to remember why this was different. A stickiness of blood on her cheek told her. This time it was real.

Memory crowded in as she tried to trace back to the beginning, to when it all started. Days and incidents slid by, ending with Eddie James's voice that evening, talking to Grace. "I don't trust guys like him . . . making a fool of yourself . . . if you can't see . . ."

Had Eddie seen?

Over the drumming of the rain she heard another sound, the steady approach of footsteps, then the click of the padlock. The door was pushed open, and he was back. He stepped over her calmly, sat down on a bale of hay, and lighted a cigarette. He sat there smoking in the dark, and Margaret watched in frightened fascination as the small glowing tip of the cigarette reflected off his features. She saw why he had left. He was holding a shotgun across his knees. He must have gone to his car to fetch it; she had not even noticed the car earlier.



Now he sat there waiting.

"That son of a bitch is taking his time," he said at last.

"Maybe he's not coming back," she said. "He took his van. Maybe he's gone for good." She bit her swollen lip. Should she have said that? Was he less apt to hurt them with Eddie gone?

"Oh no. He's just gone out for a few beers. He'll be back for more of what he's been getting." Bitterness had crept into his tone. "I can wait. I'll take him first, then you. It'll look as if I tried to come to your rescue." He paused. "This whole thing would have been a snap without the two of you," he went on then, almost conversationally. "I don't know which one's worse—that beer-guzzling cowboy or you with your scared mouse act. You're about one step from the nut house, you know that, kid?"

She could feel his eyes on her, smell the smoke from his cigarette. He said thoughtfully, "I could have handled a good-looking woman with a valuable piece of property. Hell, that's a cinch—I've done it before. Even the other guy wasn't fair competition—goddamned cowboy. But you. You were a real problem. You came first with her. I could see that. And you'd never want to get rid of this broken-down farm, no matter how good the offer was. Hell, you know what this place is worth? Development going on

all around you?" His tone was almost conversational again, as if he were about to cite figures.

Margaret, her eyes used to the dark now, looked around the tiny shed. Her head was pounding. A long-handled shovel stood by the door, some loops of baling wire hung over a nail. Nothing else except for the hay stacked against the wall. Nothing that would help, and nothing that she could reach anyway. Her knife was gone; he had taken that. She moved painfully. He had wrapped her as tight as a sausage, only the rope he had used was the plump slippery nylon one she had planned to use to lead Royal back. It held a knot poorly. She worked at it clumsily while he sat there smoking.

"What if he doesn't come back?" she asked at last.

"I'll think of something." He dropped his cigarette on the floor and let it ignite a small clump of straw before stamping it out with the heel of his boot. "A fire would do. Lightning." Margaret could feel sweat, cold and clammy, starting out over her whole body. The knot was looser but it still held. She was afraid to try harder for fear he would hear.

From a distance came the sound of a motor. Eddie James's van coming from the county road. But he would turn up the drive to the house. He would never know she was in the shed

with Tom. She held her breath, listening. Tom heard it, too. He got up from the bale where he had been sitting. He held the shotgun in his left hand. With his right he pulled the door open a crack and looked out. Then he shut it again and turned, pulling down the bales from where they were stacked, tossing them this way and that. Awkwardly, because he was doing it with one hand, not letting go of the shotgun. Some of the bales came tumbling against her. The wire binding of one ripped along her forearm. She hardly noticed. She worked quickly at the rope that held her wrists.

He had uncovered the small window that faced the meadow. It was hinged at one side. He undid the catch and yanked at the handle to open it. It stuck, and she heard him swear and give it another wrench. This time it opened. Cool damp air flooded in from outside. She could not hear the van now. Had it gone up the slope to the house already? She saw Tom Beckwith at the window. It was just at the level of his chest. Slowly he raised the shotgun, steadied it on the window frame, and lowered his head to take aim. There was an unaccustomed light beyond him, as if the meadow were illuminated. Then through the storm, distantly, she heard Eddie's voice. "Come on, boy! Hold still, boy!"

The little hut exploded with sound as Tom fired. Margaret yanked wildly at the rope holding her, felt it slide away. At the same moment she heard the pounding of hooves galloping past the shed and out through the gate. She scrambled to her feet, not caring, suddenly, whether he heard. But now his attention was focused outside. She could see over his shoulder, see that the field was flooded with light from the van, which had been parked at the gate. Halfway across the field, picked out by the headlights' glare, she could see Eddie. He was bent over, one knee resting on the ground, a lead rope trailing from his hand. He tried to straighten himself. There was blood seeping through his wet shirt. The man in the shed leaned forward to take aim again. Margaret got to her feet and reached for the long-handled shovel that leaned against the wall. She held it by the end of the handle and swung it in a huge arc, putting all her strength behind it. It caught him at the back of the head. He toppled over a bale of hay and lay still. She grabbed the shotgun and ran toward the field. Eddie had staggered to his feet and was stumbling toward her.

**B**etween them they fastened Tom Beckwith's wrists and ankles with baling wire, but by the

time they had finished she could tell Eddie's strength had run out.

"We've got to get you to a doctor," Margaret said nervously. "You're bleeding pretty bad."

"I don't think he hit anything important inside," he gasped, but his breathing was shallow and labored as if it hurt.

"Sit here," she said, and propped him as well as she could among the hay bales, trying all the while to pull safety around her, to think all her safest thoughts. About living in a house on a hilltop, sitting in a yellow kitchen, checking the fence daily to make sure it was holding.

All games.

"Get up to the house," he said. "Call the sheriff."

"All right. My mother can drive you to the hospital."

"You'll have to wait here for the sheriff."

Fear buzzed in her ears. Her throat had gone dry. "Okay," she breathed. "Okay. I'll wait." But could she? Could she bear to stay here alone in the night, in the storm? She darted a frightened look at the bound man. With him?

"Hang onto that gun," Eddie said. "Not that this guy's going anywhere, but hang onto it anyway."

"I will," she said. There was something astonishing in his assumption that she could manage.

"You came back to get Roy in," she whispered.

"Yeah, well—" He attempted a shrug and winced.

"And you knew about him—about Tom?"

"Oh, hell, kid," he said softly, "it's not so hard to spot a con man. And I wasn't so damned smart. I didn't take him for a killer."

Other words, unspoken, lay between them in the dark shed, jumbled in a random heap like Scrabble tiles. She wondered if they would ever be able to put them in order. She heard him gasp faintly, "Ooh doggies—"

"I'll get help," she said, suddenly frantic with haste. She ran out of the shed and up the slope, bending against the rain, clutching the shotgun. She heard Royal pawing at the barn door, saw the outside light come on at the house. Grace appeared, raincoat thrown on over her nightgown. She was looking around anxiously.

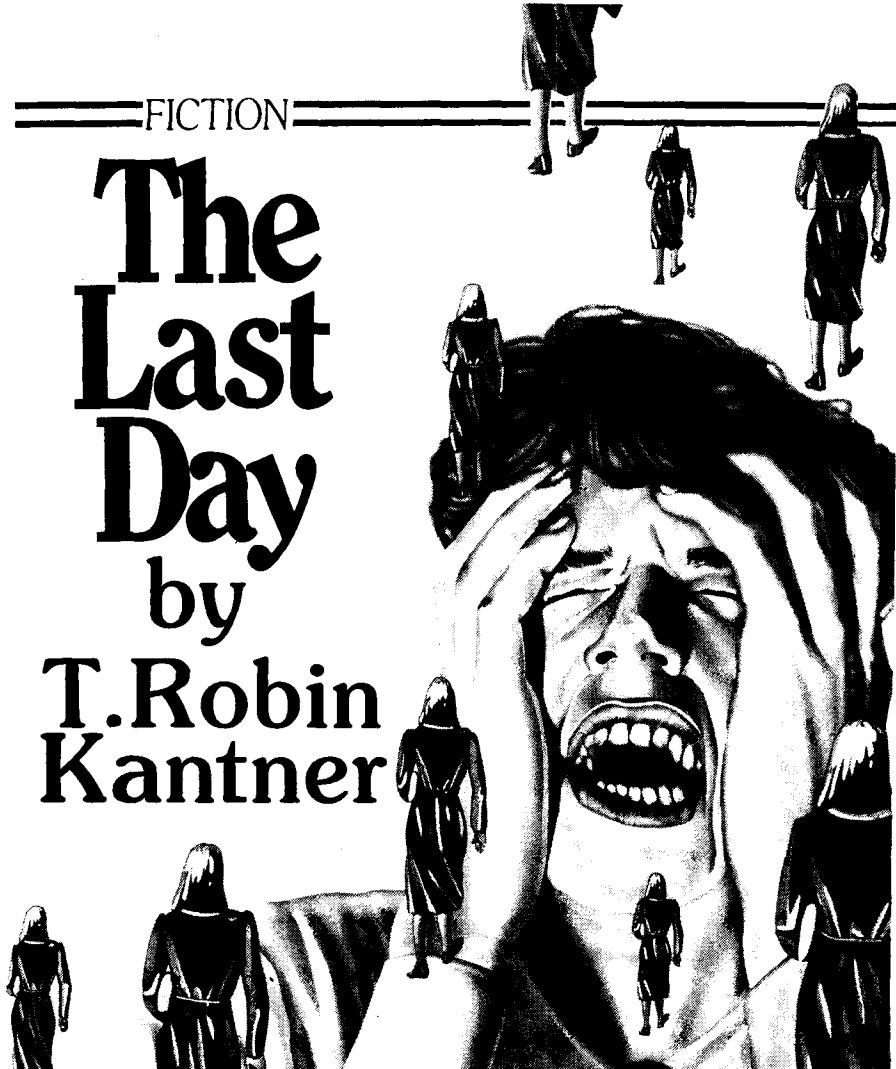
"Maggie?" she called out. "What's wrong?"

"I'm here," Margaret called out. "I'm okay." And then, in a firmer, stronger voice, taking charge, "I'm all right."

FICTION

# The Last Day

by  
T. Robin  
Kantner



**H**ell probably won't be much hotter than this, Kramer thought as he stared intently at the snapshots arrayed on his desk. The building management, apparently for energy reasons, turned off the air conditioning on weekends, and the heat had risen through the building to the point where here, on the eleventh floor, it was smothering. It mottled Kramer's broad, fleshy face with patches of red, caused sweat to run down his flanks under the open-necked dress shirt, made him feel like he was breathing scorched cotton.

*Illustration by John Jinks*

The suite was Saturday-silent save for Kramer's labored breathing and the murmur of someone's neglected radio, playing easy-listening music in one of the other offices. He tried to focus on the snapshots. Newborn faces, crawling faces, toddler faces. He shuffled and rearranged them like puzzle pieces. He squinted down through weary eyes at the backgrounds, trying to find clues. This one had to be Debbie. No doubt about it. But was this one Davey or Tom?

The little reddish faces blurred and began to look alike. Ignoring the rest of the packing work he had to do, Kramer grabbed more snapshots out of the box on the floor next to him and spread them out, turning them right side up, scanning the faces. They defiantly blurred into a single unidentifiable one. Finally he made a sound between a growl and a moan and sat back from the desk, almost in a trance, panting heavily.

Suddenly she was there before him, seeming to fill his office. He looked up at her numbly; he'd heard or seen nothing of her approach. She was erect, staring emptily, wearing a blue two-piece suit and unseasonably heavy black dress shoes. In the silence she sat down on the well-worn, wood visitor's chair in one fluid movement. Then she jerkily clenched her hands together and shivered. "God, I'm cold."

*Amherstburg, the past*

Tricia jerkily clenched her hands together and shivered. "God, I'm cold."

Kramer's car sat next to the bridge where Sibley Road crossed the river. The near bank began just at the right side of the car, and plunged steeply down drifts of snow to the ice-choked water. The far side of the river was invisible, obscured by the driving sleet that came down in parallel, solid ranks, occasionally twisted into implike gyrations by gusts of frigid wind. The car's residual heat was fading, but Kramer didn't notice, thanks to his usual lunch of Rusty Nails chased with beer. Tapping the steering wheel impatiently, he said curtly, "Should have worn your coat."

"I barely caught you as it was, you ran out of the office so fast. I thought you were going to leave me standing there in the parking lot." She laughed nervously. "Did Hopkins see you leave?"

"Who cares? I'm through as of tomorrow. What's he gonna do, fire me?" He thought, come on, let's get it over with.

The light was fading fast. An occasional car whooshed past on the slushy road. In the distance to their right, where the reddish sun made its pathetic last stand, the ugly towers and stacks of the

Axle plant loomed. Gradually the windshield fogged, then iced over. Kramer stared straight ahead, seeing nothing, but aware that Tricia was looking down at her fingernails, lips pursed, figuring out how to approach it. She said quietly, "When do you leave for Cincinnati?"

"Sunday. Job starts Monday." He didn't bother to conceal the harshness in his voice.

"And Elaine's staying?"

He leaned his head back and laughed, squinting. Oh boy, was she ever, and who could blame her. If there were a Purple Heart for wives, Elaine would win it with oak leaf clusters. Not that he'd ever confessed about Tricia. He wasn't that dumb. He'd observed Lenny Bruce's dictum to "lie and keep on lying."

But at the end it had made no difference. Not after the drunken binges and all-night parties. The foreclosures and repossessions and disconnects. The screaming and throwing and poisonous arguments. The terrified, bewildered faces of the small children looking frantically back and forth from parent to parent.

Tricia took his arm; he barely felt her hand through his thick coat and numb skin. He jerked away. She said softly, "Then take me with you."

"No can do," he said with finality.

She pressed herself against him, using her body as a method of persuasion as she'd done so many times before, desperately trying to make eye contact. "But it's all perfect now. No more ties for either of us. I love you, I want to make it better for you—"

He struck like a panther, spinning and shoving her away from him. "Forget it, see? I'm loose and I'm staying that way."

The headlights of a passing car splashed whitely on her face, showing tear trails. "This isn't fair. I've played the game your way for months now. Sneaking around, secret meetings, waiting for hours, just to protect you and your job and your marriage." In the darkness there were no more tears in her voice, just anger. "Now you're free. And you owe me. And I'm collecting."

There had been so many voices shouting at him lately. On the phone, at home, at the office. All the shouting voices had merged into one by now. It was him versus It. He had borne it and borne it and would bear it no longer.

With a crash he flung himself across the seat against her. One hand smashed her head against the window, the other pawed for the door handle. The door flew away into the white-streaked darkness as a blast of wintry wind roared hungrily in. Tricia gave one

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terrified shout as she spun off-balance out of the car, and he got a glimpse of blue skirt and tan stockings and sturdy black shoes as she tumbled silently down the lumpy, ice-blanketed riverbank into the darkness beyond.

*Cincinnati, the past*

"Here's your office," Hedgepath, the marketing director, said casually. "Get settled. I'm holding a product manager's meeting at ten."

Kramer dumped his two worn cartons of belongings on the bare, chipped wood desk and laid his briefcase on the cold gray steel table behind it. The single uncurtained window gave a glum view of Government Square and the snowcapped Procter & Gamble headquarters. He turned and pulled his creaking chair back and sat down. Outside his office, fellow employees whose names he'd already forgotten buzzed back and forth on Monday morning New Year business, some of them making mechanical welcoming smiles as they caught his eye.

The walls, pocked with nail holes and naked picture hangers, seemed so close that he could reach out and touch the opposite ones with both hands. Shaking himself out of his reverie, Kramer reached out and opened the first carton. Right on top: a large brown manila envelope stuffed with snapshots of his children. Now what the hell is this doing here? he thought as he tossed it on the table behind him.

"God, I'm cold."

It came from outside his office. Kramer went dead still, then rose uncertainly. The voice spoke again, saying something indistinguishable. He strolled out of his office and went around the corner. The voice issued from behind an orange acoustic divider. Kramer hurried around to the entrance and peered in; a woman there smiled and waved mechanically. The voice came from behind him now, echoing into the distance. He stood, staring after it in the unfamiliar suite, then trudged back into his office and resumed unpacking.

Hedgepath introduced Kramer, and the faces of the five other product managers focused on his expectantly. The marketing director folded his hands on the conference room table and said, "He'll be responsible for the heat inverter. This is, as you know, an energy saving device for manufacturing plants designed to recirculate hot air from the ceilings down to the ground level where it's needed.



You'll recall that we have two thousand completed units in inventory, ready to ship. I expect Mr. Kramer to develop a plan that will sell them." He slid a thick blue three-ring notebook across to Kramer. "Here's background on the product and the market. Good luck!" He made the briefest mechanical smile, then went on to other business.

As befitted the most junior product manager on the staff, Kramer had the seat farthest away from Hedgepath, next to the half-open conference room door. He smoked cigarette after cigarette as the marketing director droned on and on, and glanced periodically at his watch, counting the minutes till lunch.

"God, I'm cold."

Kramer jerked himself straight in his chair and involuntarily shot a glance at the open conference room door, then back at Hedgepath. The marketing director was in the middle of a closing soliloquy and Kramer fidgeted, staring at the ceiling, trying to keep from looking at the door. Finally the meeting was done and everyone rose, the mood breaking with conversation and laughter. Kramer hoisted his notebook and shot through the door. The lobby area was deserted except for the receptionist and a female figure in a navy blue suit walking away from him toward the fire stairs. As she disappeared behind the clicking door, Kramer said to the receptionist, "Who was here just now?"

Like most recently emerged adolescents in positions of quasi-authority, she was swelled with self-importance. "Nobody in particular, why?"

"She sounded—looked familiar, that's all," Kramer said uncomfortably.

"Just the new girl down on ten," the receptionist lectured. "Lots of new people around here today."

"Thanks," Kramer said without thinking, and headed toward the fire stairs. But Hedgepath's voice halted him.

"Better see me in about an hour once you've gone over those notes on the inverter," the marketing director called from the conference room door. The product managers clustered around Hedgepath eyed Kramer like he was a specimen.

Kramer reversed course smoothly. "Right, okay, boss," he said, making his best, most confident smile.

"You know, Kramer, you ought to clean up your act," Stedman said, eyeing him from across the booth through thickish glasses.

Ogden's Pub was jammed tight with lunch customers, its long

windowless length noisy and stuffy and humid from the bodies and the warmish spring weather outside. Kramer tossed back the last of his Rusty Nail and said, "Whaddya mean? I'm doing great. You ought to see the dealer orders we're booking on the heat inverter."

Stedman was senior product manager, a steady, quiet, sober sort with the kind of confidence that made his work look effortless. He shook his head patiently and said, "No, I mean *that*," gesturing at the empty glass.

Kramer picked up his beer mug and took a pull. "You know the routine," he said ingratiatingly. "This is a tough line of work. You gotta keep loose."

Stedman frowned, looking up, then leaned forward and said, "You look like hell, Kramer." His mild voice belied the harshness of his statement. "You eat garbage, if anything at all. You got extra weight, you're bleary, I been watching you, you don't track so good sometimes." When Kramer didn't answer, Stedman said, "It's a pity, really. 'Cause I think there's a real sharp guy in there trying to get out."

Kramer drank some more beer and wiped his mouth clumsily, ignoring Stedman's quiet eyes on him. "My problem, pally," he whispered.

"God, I'm cold."

It was literally a voice in a crowd, a long way off but definitely from behind. Kramer set his mug down much harder than he'd meant to and turned and looked back over the back of his booth toward the rear of the pub. Finally he made his eyes focus in the dim light on the back of a woman's head, the distinctive tilt, the familiar sweep of dark hair. With her in the booth sat another woman who was completely unknown to him.

Stedman said, "What's up?"

Kramer turned uncomfortably back to him. "Familiar voice I thought I heard."

Stedman hitched himself up and squinted. "Couple of girls from ten. You know them?"

"No," Kramer said thickly, sure it was the truth. He rushed on, "But really, this inverter is moving pretty good. Not bad for four months on the job."

"Good for you," Stedman said casually. "That product's broken a lot of hearts." He glanced at his watch. "Got a meeting. You coming?"

Kramer stood and turned unsteadily toward the rear of the pub. "No, I got to take a squirt. See you back there."

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He shuffled half unwillingly down the aisle, determined at last to set eyes on the face and listen to the voice and find out. But when he got there, the booth was empty.

Many Cincinnatians referred to summer as "monkey's armpit weather." The fire stairs were stiflingly hot as Kramer puffed up them from ten and emerged into the reception area of his floor. He strode into the offices, trying to get control of his breathing, trying to keep from shouting. Missed her again. As usual. He'd heard it all. "Away from her desk." "Off sick." "Out to lunch." "Had to run some errands." All he ever got was a glimpse of her back here, the sound of her voice there, always from around corners, in crowds, in the next room. Once—he was sure—he even passed her car going the other direction on Fort Washington Way. He'd doubled back and given chase but lost her on Mount Adams. . . .

He was almost to his office when Hedgepath passed him. "In my office," the marketing director said without explanation, and without stopping.

Kramer cruised up to Hedgepath's open office door, his heavy notebooks in hand, trying to get his mind on business and—with no success—to anticipate the subject of the meeting. Hedgepath pointed him to a chair, leaned forward with his chin on his fists, and said, "You seen the dealer return figures on the inverter?"

"Yeah, I haven't analyzed them yet, but—"

Hedgepath held up a hand. "Well, allow me to analyze them *for* you. It's a rout, my friend. Our sales figures are going to have to be revised downward about ninety percent."

"Guess the field people couldn't make them stick," Kramer said nervously.

"I guess," Hedgepath said evenly, "you didn't market them properly."

"Hey, you approved the plan, you saw the orders—"

"Hey, I delegated the whole thing to you. You got lots of dealer orders, but dealer orders aren't sales if the dealers send the product back. In other words, just to make it absolutely clear to you, loading the pipeline isn't the same thing as sales. Or did you know that?"

"I got some feedback from the field," Kramer said, trying to keep his tone constructive. "The inverter requires AC outlets in the ceilings. Most plants don't have them and can't justify the cost of installing them, despite the potential energy savings."

"Tell me something I don't know. You know how long we've been trying to sell that miserable stillborn heat inverter? You know how

many different things we've tried? Including, may I add, hiring Mr. Hotshot Kramer, veteran product manager. You loaded the pipeline, and it's backing up into us. It's the joke of the industry, my friend."

Kramer wanted to explode, to accuse Hedgepath of sandbagging him with a worthless product and to protest the unfairness of judging Kramer's ability on this effort alone. But the best he could do was to sputter weakly, "I—I did the best I could."

Hedgepath smiled grimly and shook his head. "That's loser talk. The bottom line is all that matters. The guy who sleeps the workday away and sells the product is a hero. The guy who puts in eighteen hours a day—and fails—is, for lack of a better word, fired."

Kramer's arms and legs felt leaden. His pulse raced. He felt an unbelievable hot flash start at his neck and flow in waves over his face. He stared dully at Hedgepath, barely comprehending his next words.

"I want you off the premises right now. Tomorrow's Saturday; you can come back in and collect your stuff." He turned away, leaned on his credenza, and stared out the window. Kramer sat there a long time before he could get up and leave.

### *Cincinnati, the last day*

Kramer didn't notice his children's faces staring up at him from the desk. His throat was so dry he could barely swallow. He squinted through sweat-moistened eyes at the woman. She stared at him from a great distance, rubbing her hands together as if they were frozen.

He said in a hoarse, cracked voice, "You can't imagine what it's been like. I had it all. I was on top of it. I'd made it. Finished with the marriage, better job, big exciting city. Instead this." He paused and licked his lips with a dry, furry tongue. He noticed that the color was going out of her face and hands. "It's all gone so incredibly sour. I got crippling money problems. Job that's rotten to the core. Nothing's fun any more." Her skin was now dry-bone white and seemed to be hardening. He said, "Nobody to talk to. And, God, I miss Elaine and the kids and I can't see them. And now I'm fired. I've got nowhere to go and no one to be with." He looked at her stark, staring, expressionless face. "I'm glad you came anyway. Despite what I did."

Her convulsion nearly made him jump. It was a savage, palsied shaking, as if the woman were penetrated to the core by incredible cold. Her breathing became rapid and shallow and rasping, and

she swallowed uncontrollably over and over again. And she said: "Too late too late too late." Her eyes rolled up in their sockets and her clothes became damp and dirty, then went white with a coating of unclean ice. "Too late too late too late" came the voice, way back and almost gone.

Kramer pitched forward on his desk. It was as though someone had grabbed his shirt front and yanked him down. His chin bounced on the hard wood with a crack, his legs bounced and jerked, he gasped and choked, and then he lay still, eyes frozen open.

*Cincinnati, the present*

"Mr. Hedgepath?" asked the frizzy-haired older woman in her whining yet commanding voice.

"Yes, Greta?"

"There's no word on Patricia."

"Who?"

"Patricia. The new dark-haired girl on ten." Though Greta didn't mention it, she took some grim pleasure from the nickname the other girls had hung on Patricia: The Spook. "Her apartment is empty and she left no forwarding address."

"So she ankled. Big deal. Hire somebody else."

Greta held up a yellow piece of paper. Sometimes you had to explain *everything*. "Where shall I send her final check?"

"How about the circular file? She leaves without notice, she takes her chances."

Greta put a chubby hand up and leaned on the doorframe, the natural-born gossip in her aroused. "Don't you think it's odd? You wouldn't think a person would just up and leave the day before payday. At least not without getting her check."

"Any other decisions I can make for you, Greta? I'm busy."

Well, who wasn't? She brought her hand down. "Uh, yes, as a matter of fact. Mr. Kramer's office. I suggest we leave it empty for a while. Until the memory of, uh, the event, fades a little."

"It's an office, not a historical site. Have it ready by the tenth. That's when the new heat inverter product manager starts."

"Very well."

Greta trudged away from the office, absently fanning herself with the check. Her feet were tired and sore. Never any satisfaction from anybody. First this one complains, then that one wants something. Now she'd have to figure out whether to fix or replace the carpet in Kramer's office. That big wet spot refused to evaporate. That big, wet, bitterly cold spot.

# UNSOLVED

by  
Jerome Meyer

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

They finally caught the lone bandit who held up the armored truck and got away with \$236,000. Using sound logic and careful reasoning, the brilliant district attorney picked him from seven other suspects knowing that exactly half the suspects were telling lies but not knowing just who they were. See if you can do as well as the district attorney.

Here are the eight men and what they said:

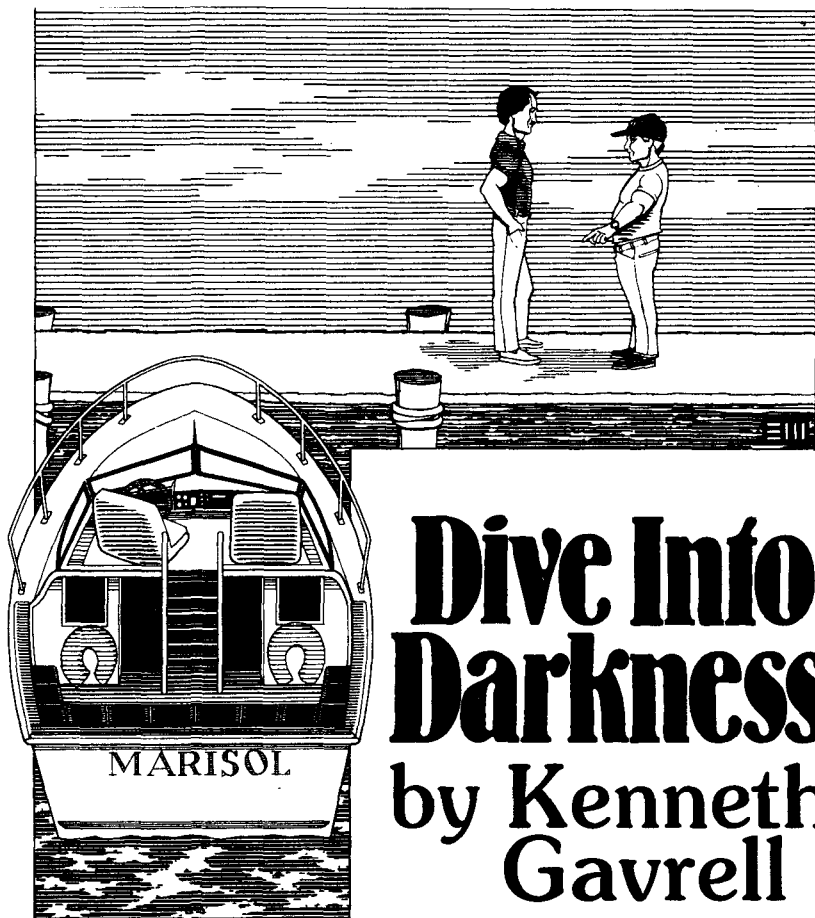
1. Frazetti: "Either Burns or Hoffman is guilty."
2. Adams: "I am the guilty man."
3. Cuminski: "Goldberg is telling the truth."
4. Hoffman: "Adams and Donovan are entirely innocent."
5. Edwards: "Let 'em all go; I'm the man who did it."
6. Burns: "I saw Hoffman do it."
7. Donovan: "Frazetti is innocent."
8. Goldberg: "Donovan lies when he says Frazetti is innocent."

*Who is the guilty man and why?*

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See page 147 for the solution to the April puzzle.

"Who Is Guilty?," taken from Puzzle Quiz & Stunt Fun by Jerome Meyer. Copyright © 1948, 1956, 1972 by Dover Publications, Inc., N.Y., N.Y.



# Dive Into Darkness

by Kenneth Gavrell

**“T**here’s a dead fly in your kitchen,” Alma said.

“I find one every once in a while,” I said. “They die of hunger.”

“You don’t have a hell of a lot to eat around here.”

“I don’t like to cook.”

“So I’ve noticed.” She set my coffee on the table. I grabbed her around the waist. She kissed me on the head and pulled out of my arms. “It’s eleven in the morning—time for other things. You promised to take me to the beach.”

“I can’t live by a schedule.”



I made another grab for her.

She twisted out of reach. "I'll go put on my bathing suit."

"I'll help you."

I pushed up from my chair while she dashed for the bedroom. I heard the lock button click. "You weren't this coy last night," I said through the door.

"I really *do* want to go to the beach," she said.

I went back to the table and drank my coffee. The phone rang. I lifted the receiver and replaced it. A minute later it started ringing again.

Persistent.

My "hello" didn't sound very friendly.

"Carlos, this is Johnny Rivera."

"Hello, Johnny, what's up?"

"I've got to see you."

The bedroom door clicked open, and Alma emerged in her turquoise two-piece suit. She wore a matching ribbon in her long dark hair. She only looked like a goddess.

"I'm tied up just now," I said into the phone.

"It's important," Johnny Rivera said. "I've *got* to see you."

"You mean right now?"

"As soon as possible. I'm at the Vista Motel in Carraízo. Room 8."

"What the hell are you doing there?"

"Hiding."

"How about giving me one or two details."

"Someone tried to kill me this morning. He was hidden on my boat. He's dead instead."

"Jesus Christ, Johnny. How? Why? What happened?"

Alma was staring at me now. She was also staring at the end of our beach excursion.

"They want something I've got," Johnny said, "but it's safe now, unless they want to take a bath. This punk was hidden in the head and came out with a knife, we struggled, I was stronger, and he wound up dead. I tossed his body overboard and came back in."

"Did you report it to the police? Who was he?"

"No, I didn't report it to the police. And I never saw him before in my life."

I tucked the phone against my shoulder and lit a cigarette.

"Well, all right," I said reluctantly. "Room 8, Vista Motel."

I heard the receiver replaced at the other end.

"Don't tell me," Alma said. "Someone in trouble. Only you can help. You've got to leave."

I nodded wearily. The weariness was only psychological.

Alma released a mild expletive in Spanish.

"I don't like it any more than you do," I said.

"How serious is it?"

"A man killed."

"Someone you know?"

"No, but the one who called is. An old track acquaintance.

The only guy I know who consistently comes out ahead at El Comandante."

Alma started for the bedroom again. "Can I at least come with you?"

"He asked that I come alone," I lied.

"Oh, that's just fine," she said. She banged the door to.

"I'll get back as soon as I can," I called.

She opened the door a little. "I've heard that story before," she rattled off in machine-gun Spanish. "That could mean next Tuesday."

I walked over to the bedroom door. Alma was throwing clothes around.

"I've got to go. It sounds like he's in a mess. I'll call you at your place as soon as I'm through."

"I won't be at my place," she said.

"Well, where will you be?"

"I don't know. Maybe at the beach. Call me at the beach."

**T**he Vista Motel, with its *cabañas ejecutivas*, was one of those places where nobody ever saw the sun come up. It sat at the top of a hill over Lake Carraízo, a one story yellow-sided affair with a drive circle in front of the office and a parking lot lining the length of the building. There were two cars in the lot; one of them Johnny's used Saab. A

man was leaning against the office screen door smoking a cigarette and contemplating the lake view. He was about forty-five, heavy-built, and wore bluejeans and a tank top.

"*Una habitación?*" he asked idly.

"*No, quiero visitar a un amigo en cuarto ocho,*" I said offhandedly.

I started toward Johnny's screen door. He followed me with his idle, all-seeing eyes.

The green drapes of Room 8 were drawn. Its air conditioner was wheezing asthmatically and feeding a good-sized puddle on the pavement. I rapped on the door. No response. I turned the knob and the door opened. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the shadowy darkness after the bright sunlight.

The room was empty and looked like it hadn't been tidied up in a month. I closed the door and said, "Johnny?"

All I heard was the sick air conditioner.

I stepped over a blanket on the floor and looked into the bathroom. He was there, all right. Sitting with his back to the wall next to the sink. His eyes were open, and there were two dark holes in his red shirt just to the right of his breast pocket. His hands lay open, palms up, as if he were saying, "Look, no tricks."

Johnny hadn't been a close

friend of mine, just a track acquaintance, but it wasn't pleasant to see anyone in that condition. The body was still warm.

I went through his pockets and found only a wallet (nothing of great interest inside except two hundred dollars), his keys, a handkerchief, and some loose change. I took the keys.

I went out to the main room and gave it a quick but thorough once-over. The disorder suggested that someone had already done the same. I didn't expect to find anything, and I wasn't disappointed. A telephone book lay open on the bed beside the table phone. It was opened to the B's. One of the B's was my name.

Locking the room door behind me, I stepped out again into the brassy sunlight. The tank-topped guy was still leaning against the office door, watching me. I strolled over.

"*No está,*" I said. "*No entiendo—aquél es su carro.*"

He eyed me over his inch of cigarette.

"*Usted no le vió salir?*" I asked. "You didn't see him leave?"

He shook his big head and dropped the butt to the ground just before it seared his hairy fingers. He didn't bother to step on it. Smoke wafted idly into the yellow allamandas.

"He gets a lot of company,"

he grunted in Spanish. "You're the second one today."

"Who was the first?" I asked, trying not to sound too interested.

"Don't know. Didn't see him enter or leave. I just heard his voice inside."

*How did you hear his voice and not hear the two shots?* I thought. But the obvious, the only, answer was a silencer. Small caliber automatic.

"He parked his car down the road apparently. I didn't see the car."

I offered him another cigarette. He accepted, and we lit up off my lighter. Insects droned lazily in the allamandas.

"Isn't that unusual?" I offered.

"Don't know. Lots of funny business goes on. I just make sure they pay." He eyed me as if wondering what sort of funny business I was into.

"There's a hall runs along the back of the building. I suppose he left that way."

Then I remembered the other, obviously hall, door I'd seen in the room.

"Leads to an exit at that end of the building." He pointed with his jaw.

I treated the yellow flowers to some Camel smoke and studied the view with him.

"Well, I can't wait around," I said.

"He probably went for a walk

with his friend," the big man said. He smirked.

"Nice country around here," I said.

"When it isn't raining," he said. He squinted at the absolutely blue sky. "It won't rain today."

"Well, take it easy," I said. I flicked my cigarette across the pavement and walked to my car. Except for his right hand and his mouth, he hadn't moved a muscle since I'd arrived, but I imagined his eyes followed my car down the steep drive.

I headed back up 175 to San Juan. What I should have done was call Homicide from the motel, and I should have stayed there. But I didn't want the police in on it yet. I wanted a little flexibility before they began poking around and laying down the rules. I wouldn't have much time, though. Pretty soon Ol' Idle Eyes would discover Johnny's body, and then he'd remember my car—maybe even my license plate. But I wasn't too worried about that. The guys at Homicide knew me by now. They knew I didn't own any small caliber automatics with silencers. But they wouldn't be any too delighted with me just the same.

Johnny had once mentioned where he lived: a sprawling white condominium named the Va-

lencia off Piñero Avenue. I pulled up in front of it at twelve thirty by my watch and parked in the street. I didn't see anybody around who looked like police, so I got out and sauntered through the open gate and up a path to the main entrance. It wasn't hard to find the correct key on Johnny's ring, and I nodded politely to the uniformed guard as I let myself into the lobby. On the right lobby wall was a myriad of mailboxes, and it took me some minutes to methodically track down Johnny's name and apartment number: 1210. The building had four elevators, but they were all up in the empyrean, and I had to cool my heels for another five minutes before one of them condescended to drop to earth. I took it up to twelve and found Johnny's apartment three doors off to the left.

He had two locks on the door. I let myself into a spacious living-dining room with a wall of glass facing me. Beyond the glass was a balcony with potted plants, two garden chairs, and a metal table. The pillow of one sofa was hanging over its edge like a car about to plunge off a cliff. A chest of drawers near the door had its bottom drawer pulled far out. Two of the three big pictures on the walls hung at careless angles. Someone had already gone over the place.

It was the same in the bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom: a thorough but not rabid search. I concentrated on Johnny's papers and personal effects. I found a lot of stationery of various kinds with a Huntford Electronics letterhead (Johnny had told me he was in computers). I found two calculators, several computer printouts, a couple of notebooks full of figures, a current racing sheet, a pile of literature on boats, and an address book. In a bedroom drawer I found a framed photo of a beautiful, sultry looking girl of about twenty-five. Across the lower right-hand corner was penned: "*Con mucho amor, Ana.*"

Everything fit: no surprises: Johnny was a thirty-one-year-old bachelor who had a passion for numbers, horseraces, and his boat. I'd seen him with more than one beautiful dish at the track.

I left the place with the little brown address book in my pocket. As I approached the elevators, one opened and disgorged a thin, shortish man with glasses like the bottom of beer steins. He passed me and stopped outside Johnny's door. I stopped.

"*Sr. Rivera no está,*" I said.

He turned toward me uncertainly, blinking through his lenses. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Knock if you want."

He decided against it, walked toward me looking nervous and uncomfortable. "*Pues, no era importante,*" he said. "Well, it wasn't important. I should know he's never home on Saturdays."

We waited for an elevator together.

"Are you a friend of his?" he asked me. He spoke with a slight stammer. His manner was matched by a mousy-looking face sporting a thin fringe of black hair over the upper lip.

"An acquaintance," I said.

He didn't seem particularly interested. An elevator appeared and we descended in silence. He got off at the ninth floor with a muttered "*Adiós.*"

I said, "*Buenas tardes,*" and continued down to the eighth floor where I got out, dashed to the nearby stairwell, and sprinted back up to nine. The building curved in a shallow C with the elevators at its center. Since I didn't see him, I ran to the center of the C just in time to see a door close near the end of the hall. I waited a minute or two and then padded down to that end of the hall. His door number was 903.

Back in the lobby, the mailboxes told me that 903 was the abode of Sr. José Picó. I walked out to my car, turned the alarm off, got in, flipped my fuel cutoff switch, and took out Johnny's address book. Under the M's I found an Ana Méndez; beneath

the name a phone number and even a street address in Santurce. There were no other Anas in the little brown book, but there was a José Picó.

**A**na Méndez's address was in a part of Santurce close to the Condado, a fairly nice old residential area. Two story houses lined the street, one of which, near the end of the block, had the right number. The place looked a bit rundown; bougainvillea bloomed in the front yard, and a silver Corolla was parked in the truncated driveway. The driveway gates were open, and I entered and climbed three cement steps to the front door. Behind a protective black grill, only a screen door separated me from a living room full of winged cupids and eighteenth century shepherdesses wearing lampshades. The cheap furniture was of a shade of magenta that would have provided grounds for divorce in any court where I was judge. A TV was blaring, and a boy of about five sat in front of it on the floor. There was no doorbell, so I banged on the screen door and eventually caught his attention.

"*Busco a la Señorita Ana Méndez,*" I said. "I'm looking for Miss Ana Méndez."

He regarded me noncommittally, then turned back to the

cartoons on TV. "*Mamá!*" he yelled in good healthy voice.

A female voice shouted something from farther inside the house which I couldn't make out over the TV. Apparently the kid caught it because he yelled, "Someone wants you."

A female figure appeared at the doorway to the living room carrying a magazine in one hand. She glanced at me through the screen door, stepped around the kid, and stopped about three feet inside the doorway.

Although Puerto Rico has its share of blondes and redheads, Ana Méndez was what most *norteamericanos* think of as the typical Latin woman—dark, sultry, full-figured, long-nailed, and probably short-tempered. Her tight beige dress clawed at her, and her eyes looked as if they could singe steel.

"*Pues?*" she said.

"My name is Carlos Bannon. I'm a friend of Johnny's."

"Johnny who?" she said coolly.

"Johnny Rivera."

"Tell him to drop dead," she said.

Under the circumstances, that sounded pretty ironic.

"Could I talk to you for a few minutes?" I said. "It's something important."

"Nothing about Johnny Rivera is important to me."

"Johnny's dead," I said. Nothing else would have worked.

Her pretty eyes widened, and she lost all her truculence. "Is this a joke?"

"No joke. Can I talk to you?"

She shouted at the boy to lower the TV and then opened the screen door and the *reja*. Instead of inviting me in, she came out on the steps and swung the grill to behind her.

"What do you mean?" she asked more quietly. "What happened?"

"It looks as if he was murdered," I said.

"Murdered! Who are you?"

"I'm a private detective—a friend of Johnny's."

"Tell me what happened."

I told her some of it. Enough of it. "Why do you think someone might have shot him?" I concluded.

She half-shrugged her sexy shoulders.

"I don't know. I haven't seen Johnny for over a week. We broke up."

"Why?"

"None of your business," she shot at me; then, more softly: "Who knows? We didn't get along."

"On the phone Johnny talked about somebody wanting something he had. Do you know what he meant by that?"

She shook her head no. "Johnny did some gambling," she said. "I wasn't his first girlfriend." She lifted her shoulders again.

I gestured toward the boy. "Your son?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm divorced. This is my mother's house."

"I'm divorced, too," I said understandingly. "Well, I'm sorry I bothered you. I thought maybe you could help."

"No," she said. "It's hard to believe."

By now I didn't find anything hard to believe. "Yes," I said.

A plump woman in her fifties appeared at the door of the living room. "*Qué pasa?*" she asked.

"*Nada, Mamá.*"

The woman regarded me a moment, seemed to accept that nothing was happening, and disappeared again.

"If you think of anything that might be helpful, I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a call," I said. I passed her my card.

"*Sí,*" she said.

By the time I'd returned to my car, she was out of sight in the house. A woman to curl a man's hair and straighten out his pocketbook. Talking to her had made me hungry.

I had lunch in an open air restaurant in the Condado and then drove to my office nearby. It was Saturday so my secretary, Maria, was off. I called Alma's apartment. As I'd expected, there was no answer. Then I called Homicide and asked for either Burgos or Ro-



mero. Romero was there.

"We've been trying to get in touch with you, Bannon. You know why."

I said I knew.

"Well, let's have the story," he said with admirable patience.

I gave it to him—all of it. I don't like trouble with the police; sometimes I need them.

"What's your theory?" Lieutenant Romero asked.

"I don't have one yet. I'd suggest you run checks on José Picó and Ana Méndez."

"That's simple enough. Where will you be in case we want to talk to you again?"

"I'm going to try to see someone from Huntford Electronics. If I come up with anything, I'll let you know. If that turns out to be a dead end, I should be home later this afternoon."

"Fine," Romero said. "Oh, and Bannon, next time you trip over a dead body, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't wait four hours to let us know."

"Sorry," I said.

"Not as sorry as you will be next time." He rang off.

I pulled out Johnny's address book and dialed Ana Méndez. Her mother came on. I asked for the daughter.

"Alo?"

"This is Carlos Bannon again."

There was silence at the other end.

"I'm sorry to keep bothering you," I said, "but I was wondering if you knew anyone Johnny worked with."

Another silence. "I met someone named José," she said finally.

"José Picó?"

"I think so. He lives in the same building as Johnny."

"Thanks," I said.

"De nada."

I found Picó's number in the address book and dialed him. A man answered.

"Sr. Picó?"

"Sí. *Quién habla?*"

"This is Sergeant Hernandez at the police department," I said. "We're investigating an accident involving a Sr. Juan Rivera. We found your name in his address book."

"What's happened to Johnny?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned. "Is it serious?"

"Pretty serious, I'm afraid. We would like the name of his immediate supervisor at Huntford Electronics."

"Why?" Now the voice sounded puzzled.

I held the phone far away from me and said, "Well, what is it?" in a voice that sounded like Anthony Quinn with a bad cold.

"I'm getting it, chief," I said in my own voice.

"Hurry up," I said in my Anthony Quinn voice.

I put the receiver back to my

mouth and said, "What was that name, Sr. Picó?"

"Blaine," he stammered. "Roger Blaine."

I held the phone away from me again. "The name's Roger Blaine, chief."

"Would you know this Blaine's home phone?" I asked Picó with the receiver back at my mouth.

He gave it to me.

"Thank you. We'll most likely be getting in touch with you again."

"Wait, what about—" he began, but I already had the receiver back in its cradle.

I should have been a ventriloquist.

The phone was answered on the second ring—a woman's voice in English.

"I'd like to talk to Mr. Blaine," I said.

"I'm afraid he's not in just now. Who's calling, please?"

"My name's Carlos Bannon. Do you know when Mr. Blaine will be back?"

"Oh, in an hour or so, I suppose. He said by four."

"I'll call back," I said.

"Can I take a message?"

"No," I said, "thank you. I'll call later."

I drove to my apartment in Rio Piedras, made myself a decent-sized drink, and switched on the football game on TV. The game was slow. I called Alma's number again and got no answer again. At four I called

Blaine's house; this time he was in. I told him I was investigating an accident involving Johnny Rivera and asked if I could see him. He wanted more details, but I said I'd tell him everything when I saw him: it was too involved to go into on the phone. So he gave his address in Guaynabo.

**R**oger Blaine was a chunky, strongly built man with steel grey hair and a pockmarked face. He wore an expensive white *guayabera* with long sleeves and a pair of silk slacks that probably cost more than my suit. He looked tough, smart, and competitive. Nothing he said belied that impression.

We were sitting across from each other on matching cream-colored easy chairs. The living room was big and beautiful. The house was big and beautiful. The neighborhood was nothing to be apologetic about, either.

We were sipping Fundador. Blaine had placed the decanter on the low table between us. In ten minutes I'd told him about Johnny's phone call and what I'd found at the Vista Motel. I'd also mentioned my trip to Johnny's apartment.

"I didn't expect anything like this," he said.

I thought it was a funny thing to say.

"Johnny's been working on a project for us," Blaine said. "An important computer program. When he left Friday, he said he was going to spend the weekend on his boat ironing out some wrinkles in the program."

"You think that's why he was killed?"

"Why else? They're looking for the program. It's connected with something we're doing for the Defense Department."

"I'd expect you to exercise more security with it," I said.

"Nobody was supposed to know about it," Blaine said.

"Except the people at Huntford," I appended. "What might be the going price for that program on the international market?"

"Who knows? A lot. More than you'd imagine."

"If that's the motive for Johnny's death, they're still looking for it," I said. "His motel room and apartment were searched."

Then it hit me like a kick in the head. Why I'd buried it God only knew. "It's in the ocean," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"The program. I just remembered something Johnny said on the phone: 'It's safe now, unless they want to take a bath.' He put the program in the ocean, inside something that would protect it. Then he either marked the spot in some way

or else he did a triangulation so that he could return to the place."

"God," Blaine said. "It may be lost forever."

"Send someone in a boat to check the area within a few miles of the marina. If the spot is marked . . ."

"I can do that," Blaine said.

"Where's the marina?" I asked.

"Las Gaviotas, just this side of Fajardo. It's pretty late now. I'll get someone out there in the morning."

"Should we inform the Defense Department?"

"Not yet," he said, looking very uncomfortable. "We may find it tomorrow."

He got up and refilled our brandy glasses. He was upset, but it would take more than this to break his spirit.

"What do you know about José Picó?" I asked.

"A friend of Johnny's. They're both obsessed with computers. They bought apartments in the same condominium."

"Is Picó married?"

"Yes, to a woman much like himself—if you know what I mean."

"Shy, nervous type?"

He nodded. "José's almost pathologically shy. At times he seems a bit—furtive; but I think he's harmless."

"What about Ana Méndez?"

"I don't know anything about

her," Blaine said. "But she must be brighter than she looked to you, or Johnny wouldn't have gone out with her."

"A lot of women can move up without brains," I said. "All it needs is the right looks."

"Johnny wasn't that shallow," Blaine said.

"You haven't seen her," I said.

He reached into his *guayabera* pocket and pulled out a packet of breath mints; he extended them to me.

"No, thanks."

He popped two into his mouth.

"I think I'll go out to the marina myself in the morning," I said. "What's Johnny's boat called?"

"The *Marisol*, I think."

I drained my brandy glass and pushed up from the chair. "Nice place you've got here."

"I started in the slums of New Jersey," Blaine said. "Everything I've got I worked for."

"There are no 'Roger Blaines' in the Jersey slums," I said.

"I changed my name," he said, "when I was twenty-one."

He didn't say what it originally was, and I didn't ask. He popped another breath mint as he led me to the front door. Maybe his wife didn't like the smell of Fundador.

When I got home, I called Romero and told him what I'd learned.

"It sounds like the FBI might

be interested," he said.

"Blaine doesn't want to call them in yet; he hopes to turn up the program tomorrow. When will you have the results of the autopsy?"

"Maybe this time tomorrow."

"You uncover any new leads?"

"Don't be silly," Romero said, "I'm just a policeman."

**B**y ten the next morning I was out at Las Gaviotas marina. I had called Blaine before leaving, and he'd told me that his men had left at seven. They might be out all day. The marina was more than an hour's drive from San Juan, a tranquil bay embraced by long green arms of scrub and palm trees. I parked in the big sandy lot and walked down to the wooden dock that extended about seventy-five yards into the water with measured branches off either side. Next to the dock bobbed small power boats, larger cabin cruisers and sportfishers with flying bridges, sailboats, and full-fledged yachts, some as long as sixty feet. I'd always wanted to own a boat, but had never had enough money at one time to get one. Or perhaps I just hadn't wanted it badly enough.

A salty breeze blew in from the harbor mouth, and the larger sailboats swayed gracefully, showing their polished wood decks. Most of the boats were

white, and all in all it was a damned pretty picture under the morning sun. I didn't see the *Marisol*.

A fiftyish man in dirty white jeans, a T-shirt, and a Yankees baseball cap was standing against a dock rail and scratching his backside. He looked like he might be part of the furniture of the place.

I walked over.

"*Buenas*," I said. "*Usted trabaja aquí?* Do you work here?"

"Yeah," he said, "and I'd appreciate it if you'd speak English, if you can."

His surly red-rimmed eyes regarded me. The irises were a very faded blue. The face was florid and weathered and the hair yellow-grey and dirty looking. He was a drunk.

"I'm looking for a boat called the *Marisol*."

"Why?" he asked.

"It belongs to a friend of mine."

"That's no skin off my ass."

"You know the boat?" I persisted.

"Maybe, maybe not," he said. His teeth were as yellow-grey as his hair.

I pulled a ten from my wallet. "If you can tell me anything about the boat or its owner, I'll pay for the information."

He looked at the crisp ten hungrily. A ten bought three fifths of rum. Three fifths of rum would take care of his

thirst for at least twenty-four hours.

"What're you? A dick?"

"That's right."

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything you can tell me."

"A young guy owns it. Takes it out every weekend. Drives a Saab. Haven't seen him today though."

"Did he take it out yesterday?"

"Yeah, but not for long. Came in real early."

"Did you see anybody else go on board her yesterday?"

"Naw."

"Maybe before he did?"

"He was already out when I got here."

He seemed to be telling the truth.

"Where's the boat?" I said.

He gestured out toward the end of the dock. "Out there on the right side. Third or fourth from the last."

"Thanks," I said. I passed him the ten. His bony claw snapped it up like a hawk taking a mouse. The claw was trembling. Both of his claws were trembling.

"Don't like the —," he said. "Thinks he's real hot —. Comes here sometimes with this real bombshell of a —. Real hot —."

I started out the dock. Oil-stained water splashed rhythmically against the pilings.

The *Marisol* was berthed just where he'd said: a small white cabin cruiser with two inboards and a shiny teak deck. I pulled her in by one of her lines until she was close enough to jump aboard. It was clear that she hadn't been cleaned up properly after her last outing. The cabin door was locked, but the orange window drapes were open and I peered inside. I could see a table, two low seats near the table, a stove, a sink, a brown-rugged floor. The interior was in disorder, but that might or might not have been the result of violence. There were no obvious signs of violence.

Surveying the deck, I found a suspicious dark red stain on the left gunwale. It could be blood—a lot of things looked like blood. I scraped it off with my pocketknife into the metal case I used for my cigarette packs. Romero might be interested. There wasn't anything else of interest. I ambled back toward the shore.

Firewater Joe was waiting for me. There was now a paper bag of the right size beside him on the planking. His eyes looked a bit brighter. He'd worked fast.

"Didn't give you permission to go on board," he said.

"I wasn't on board," I said.

"Like hell you wasn't. My responsibility," he said. "That kind of — not permitted."

"Take another swig from your paper bag and you'll feel better about it," I said.

"You tryin' to insult me, you —?"

"Is that possible?" I said.

"Not permitted," he said. "Cost you ten more to make me forget I saw it."

"Crawl into your hole and pass out," I said.

He lurched at me and swung. I blocked his red right arm and planted one in his soft midsection. He went down, reciting a litany of epithets in a wet voice.

I left him sitting there holding his stomach. I really hadn't liked that guy.

The black Camaro was on me from the minute I left the marina. It hung back far enough so I couldn't see who was driving. If I slowed down, so did it. At stop lights it was always several cars behind me. He was good, whoever he was.

So I just went right on into town. My intention was to turn over the red stuff from the boat to Romero at headquarters. The tail stayed on me all the way. I didn't try to lose him.

It was almost noon when I parked outside the police cuartel in Hato Rey and climbed the steps. The Camaro was pulling into the post office parking lot across the street.

Romero wasn't in, neither

was Burgos, so I left the stuff with another guy in Homicide and then found a side exit from the building. A lot of walking in a big semicircle took me to the post office parking lot behind the parked Camaro. It sat so as to face the main headquarters entrance. All I could see of its occupant was a little blond hair above the headrest.

I came in fast and low and jerked open the driver's door, my right arm already raised to flatten him if necessary.

Behind the wheel sat an attractive blonde in her late twenties. Her face swung left, very startled, very scared. "Don't!" was all she said—whatever that meant.

"Keep your hands on the steering wheel," I said.

She was shaking all over her tall, slim, but nicely arranged body. She wore tight, stylish slacks and a light blue blouse, and she certainly didn't look like a mobster or a spy. She looked like a fashion model.

"What now?" she said in a very nice but shaky voice.

"Why were you tailing me?" I said. "Keep your hands on the wheel!"

"You were on the *Marisol*," she said.

"That's right. So what?"

"None of your business," she said bravely and very scared.

"So what?" I repeated.

"So I followed you," she said.

"All right," I said, "I'll play tit for tat. My name's Bannon and I'm a private detective. Now it's your turn."

Suddenly she let out a deep breath and crumpled over the wheel laughing.

"What's so funny about that?"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha." I was just tearing her up.

Eventually she calmed down and began breathing normally. "I'm a private detective, too," she said.

"You're putting me on."

"No." She started laughing again.

"Let me see your identification."

"Can I take my hands off the wheel?"

"Don't be funny."

She took a wallet out of her purse on the seat beside her and showed me a bunch of cards; they said: Ellen Howes, Crown Private Investigators, San-turce, Puerto Rico. There were two phone numbers below that. "Here's my license, too, if you don't believe me," she said.

"Skip it." I tossed her one of my own cards.

"Jesus, this is funny," she said. "Who hired you?"

"Nobody. I got into this thing by accident. Johnny Rivera was an acquaintance of mine. I found his body."

"Well, the president of Huntford Electronics brought us into it," she said. "Last night. Does



he know about you?"

"I don't know."

"I was out at Las Gaviotas making some inquiries when I saw you coming off the *Mari-sol*," she said. "Naturally I followed you."

"Naturally," I agreed.

"Well, where do we go from here?" she asked.

"I've run out of ideas," I said. "How about lunch? We can compare notes."

"All right," Ellen said. "If you promise not to slug me."

She seemed to be as sharp as she was pretty. I'd enjoy lunch. There was one thing to be said for this case: it was full of pretty women.

**A**fter lunch, having discovered that Ellen Howes knew even less than I did, I drove back to my apartment and called Alma.

"It's Carlos. Don't hang up," I said when she finally answered. "Come over here and I'll buy you a drink."

"Maybe I'm busy."

"Come on over," I said.

"Just what have you been up to for the last twenty-four hours?" Alma asked.

"I've been dating beautiful blondes," I said. "Boatloads of them."

"You should be so lucky," she said.

"Come on over."

"All right," she said, "but if you take off on me after I get there . . ."

"I won't take off on you."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," Alma said.

I leaned back on the couch and stretched my legs. I felt a little guilty about my lunch with Ellen Howes. I also felt very eager to see Alma.

**W**e were watching the sunset through my wide picture window. The sky was turning pink. On the main thoroughfare nearby, a symphony of car horns paid homage to the end of the day. I felt relaxed, contented in spite of a case that seemed to be up to its hubcaps in wet sand. I took my arm from Alma's shoulders and got up to make myself another drink.

"You drink too much," she said, her eyes still on the window.

"Not too much; maybe too often."

"What's the difference?" she asked sleepily.

"The difference is that my way you don't become like that creep at the marina."

"Yes, he sounded charming," she said.

I went into the kitchen and bathed some ice cubes in white rum. When I returned, Alma was standing at the window; I stood beside her.

"Whatever you say, you still drink too much."

"Listen, sweetheart, in twenty-odd years I've drunk everything from slivovitz to kumquat juice. I've drunk in quonset huts, Greek tavernas, under boughs, and over bodies. It's an affection I've cultivated with great care, and it never doublecrosses you like friends or business deals or women. We know the gods love us because grapes ferment. So don't go—"

"Shut up, tough guy," she said and swung her body into mine so that I stumbled back onto the sofa. She came down on top of me and we wrestled for a while. I was winning a sweet victory when the damned phone rang.

"Ignore it," I said.

But it wouldn't be ignored.

"You'd better answer it," Alma said.

I picked up the contraption.

"Bannon?"

"Speaking."

"This is Roger Blaine. We didn't find it, Bannon. They were out all day and nary a sign of any marked spot."

"Then it may be lost," I said. "You'll have to inform the Feds."

"Christ," he said. Then, hopefully: "Maybe you misunderstood what Rivera said."

"I didn't misunderstand it," I said. "I may have misinterpreted it."

"Well, that's how it stands

now," Blaine said.

"If I get any bright ideas, I'll give you a call," I said. "By the way, do you know your company president has hired a detective agency on this?"

"He told me he was thinking about it," Blaine said.

"Well, I met one of their ops this morning. She's an attractive blonde."

"I hope she's as efficient as she is attractive," Roger Blaine said.

As soon as the receiver was down, Alma said: "I heard that about the blonde. Care to go into details?"

"No, I would not. I'm entitled to some private life—or at least some private thoughts."

She threw a pillow at my head. The phone was ringing again; I hadn't even made it back to the couch.

This time it was Lieutenant Romero. The police lab had verified that my scrapings from the *Marisol* were indeed blood, type B, male. In addition, the autopsy report on Johnny had come in: he'd been killed by two .30 Mausers, one of which struck the heart. They'd been fired at point-blank range. The blood from the boat had been checked against Johnny's, and they didn't match.

I thanked Romero for the information, told him my coffee was boiling over on the stove, and hung up.

Alma was lying on the couch, dreamily watching the sky deepen to rose. The sun had already dropped from sight. I lifted my glass from the rug and took a deep swallow. The car horns were still providing romantic background music.

"Son of a bitch," I said.

"What?"

"I know!" I said. "*I know!*"

I ran into the bedroom and pulled my sack of diving equipment out of the closet. I grabbed a mask and snorkel and a waterproof flashlight. Alma stood at the door wonderingly: "Might I ask . . ."

"We're going to take a nice drive to Fajardo," I said as I ran past her into the kitchen. There I collected scissors, pliers, a hammer, a screwdriver, and a wire cutter. I also collected the rum bottle.

"You ready to go?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, "*chévere*. I like night drives. But—"

"One more thing," I said, returning to the living room and sliding open an end table drawer. I pulled out the cleaned and loaded .357 Magnum I always kept there.

"Will we need that?" Alma asked.

"I'll feel better with it. Especially if you're along."

I went back to the bedroom, grabbed a bathing suit from the closet shelf, and began changing into it.

"Can we get something to eat on the way?" Alma called. "I'm hungry."

"How can you be hungry at a time like this?" I yelled. "I *know* where that program is!"

**B**y seven ten we were in Carolina, entering Highway 3, which ran along the north coast to Fajardo and points beyond. It was a comfortably cool night for Puerto Rico, and the drive with Alma resting against my shoulder was pleasant. In Luquillo we stopped for Cubano sandwiches and coffee. By eight forty-five we'd reached Las Gaviotas.

About thirty yards down the narrow entrance road, we found a high wire gate padlocked with a chain. An equally high fence extended from the gate in either direction.

"What do we do now?" Alma said.

I turned on my bright lights and banged on the horn. "There's probably a guard," I said.

But after five minutes of horn blowing, I concluded there wasn't any guard. I examined the padlock closely and discovered it wasn't really locked, but only arranged to appear so. I'd seen this sort of thing before: it was to discourage intruders but allow anyone who came in late with his boat to exit. Sometimes fishermen came in at odd hours. Around midnight some-

one would lock up the gate in earnest.

I drove the car through and rearranged the chain and lock. We proceeded down the rutted road to the sandy parking lot. There were two cars in the lot near the office. Otherwise the place looked deserted. A couple of lonely lamps lit the parking area and the near section of the wooden dock.

I stripped off my clothes and grabbed the mask and snorkel and the waterproof flashlight. The bag of tools and the .357 Magnum I passed to Alma.

"Have you ever used a gun?"

"As a matter of fact I have: an old boyfriend of mine used to go regularly to a firing range."

"This is the safety. All you do is flick it off and pull the trigger."

"I think you're being melodramatic," she said.

We started out the dock. The place felt lonely as hell. There was no sound except the lapping of the water and the creaking of the boats. In the distant foliage, the *coquís* were singing their hearts out.

I pulled the *Marisol* in and we both hopped aboard.

"I hope there's no guard around," Alma said. "I feel like a criminal."

With a little adjustment to the strap, the mask fit snugly. I kicked off my sandals and climbed on the seaside gun-

wale. Holding the mask to my face with one hand, the flashlight in the other, I nodded to Alma and jumped off into the glistening black water.

A warm womb of bubbles. I popped back to the surface and saw Alma's head silhouetted against the night sky. A little water had entered the mask; I cleared it, switched on the flashlight, and dived down beside the hull. The flashlight beam didn't carry very far in the green, oily water. Little silver fish flitted at the light's periphery. I swam forward along the deep-V hull, which was surprisingly clean, covered only with algae. At the bow of the boat, having discovered nothing, I rose for fresh air.

"Well?" Alma called.

"There's nothing on this side," I panted. "Let's try the other."

I swam to the dock side of the hull and dived again, startling a three-foot barracuda with my flashlight beam. He shot off. Carrying the light only a few feet from the hull, I swam back the full length of the boat. There wasn't a damned thing. Oh, I was a bright one, all right. I broke surface and let out a watery grunt. Alma was hanging over the gunwale.

"I guess I guessed wrong," I said sheepishly.

She looked tense. "A car came in just now. He parked in the lot away from the lights."

"Where's the driver?" I asked.

"I don't know. I didn't see him. Maybe he's still in the car."

"Well, the only thing to do is pretend we belong here," I said. "A little brass usually works."

"Come on up," Alma said.

"In a second. I want to check the bottom."

I upended on the surface and pulled for the bottom, about eight feet below the keel. It was sandy with patches of slimy weed. I examined it thoroughly under the flashlight. There wasn't a damned thing there, either, except some rusted beer cans and a part of a broken anchor.

"I still don't see the driver," Alma whispered as I resurfaced.

I swam to the front of the boat where the thick anchor rope cut into the water. Alma followed me on top. I handed her the switched-off flashlight and grabbed hold of the anchor rope to pull myself up to the deck.

As I was hoisting myself over the front rail, my torso outlined against the sky, there were two rapid sharp cracks next to my thighs. I threw myself over the rail and shouted for Alma to get down. She fell beside me just as a pinging sound came off the rail.

"What is it?" Her voice sounded very panicked.

I'd knocked my wind out and

had trouble talking. "Someone's firing at us—using a silencer. Where's my gun?"

"On the deck in back. Oh, Carlos."

I squirmed around the sea-side port of the cabin, dropped to the rear deck, and crawled to the revolver. Then I tore off the mask and lifted my head cautiously toward the top of the gunwale facing the dock. Alma was already beside me.

"He can't be far away or he wouldn't have fired," I said.

I peered back along the dock. In a situation like this, every shadow seems threatening, anything can take on a human form. You imagine movement where there isn't any. "He's got us cornered. He just has to wait for us to expose ourselves."

"What do we do, then?" Alma said.

I was still studying the dock, my eyes just at the level of the gunwale. I decided that if he was close, there were only two places he could be: on the next branch of the dock toward shore, hiding behind a tall fishing boat that provided plenty of cover—or in a sailboat about twenty yards down the main stretch of dock that was pulled in close enough to jump easily aboard. This was what my rational mind said, my irrational told me he might be anywhere.

"I'm going after him," I said. "You just keep down."

"How? You don't know where he is."

"I think I may know."

"Don't do it, Carlos."

"What else is there to do?"

I kissed her on the cheek, which felt very cold, and crawled to the tie line fastening and pulled the stern in nearer the dock. When it was as close as it would go, I scrambled over the gunwale like a lizard being chased by White Fang.

The fourth shot came before my stomach hit the planking. I felt it singe the bridge of my nose and heard it hit a boat beyond. To have put one across my nose, he couldn't be on the dock branch below; he had to be somewhere along the main dock. The sailboat. I lay as flat and quiet as the planking, and then, when nothing more happened, I began to work my way, ever so slowly, down the dock. It was too dark out there for him to see any more of me than I could of him as I crept from shadow to shadow. Since I thought I knew where he was hidden, I had an advantage.

When I'd reached a point quite close to the sailboat, I saw a shadow detach itself from the cabin. There was no mistaking the movement. I emptied four quick rounds into the detached shadow and heard a scream and then the sound of a body falling. I rose to my feet and closed the short distance to the sailboat.

The shadow lay on the deck; it was not moving at all. I saw the gun a few feet away from it. But I kept my own trained on it as I bent over the quiet, lovely face of Ellen Howes, the blonde detective.

I didn't feel very good.

"Bring the light here," I called to Alma. "It's all right now."

A moment later I heard her running along the planking, and a moment after that I had my arm around her and the light trained on Ellen Howes' body. A body was all it was; I'd hit her three times. The gun near her hand was a .30 caliber automatic.

"My God, a woman!" Alma said. "Who is she?"

"The 'detective' supposedly working for the president of Huntford Electronics. We've been right behind each other. She figured out where the program ought to be at the same time I did."

"Your nose is bleeding!" Alma said.

"She nipped me when I jumped from the boat. It doesn't feel serious."

"There's a lot of blood."

"I've a lot more."

"Thank God you brought that gun."

"Yes."

With our arms around each other, we walked back down the long dock to the light of the parking lot.

The place seemed tranquil again. Lonely again. In Ellen Howes' car we found her own diving mask and a waterproof flashlight. Then we drove out to the main road to look for a telephone to call Homicide.

I didn't get to bed until very late that night, and when I did I couldn't sleep. My mind felt like a tree under the beak of a persevering woodpecker. In the morning, feeling very sceptical that all's right with the world, I phoned Romero at headquarters. By then, they'd determined that Ellen Howes had been associated with Crown Private Investigators, but that Crown had not been hired by the president of Huntford to look for the program. The gun Ellen Howes had was registered in her name and was probably the one that had killed Johnny—ballistics tests still had to be run on it to be certain.

Feeling a little better, I made breakfast. Halfway through my second cup of coffee, Alma called from her work to ask if she'd see me that evening. I said yes; I'd give her a call later in the day. I finished the coffee and dialed Roger Blaine at Huntford.

"Yes, Mr. Bannon?" he said hopefully.

I deflated his hopes by telling him about the events of the previous night.

"It doesn't make sense," Blaine said. "I never heard of the woman."

"I want to make another try at locating that program today," I said.

"What's left?" he asked. I could almost hear him shrugging his shoulders.

"Something's being overlooked," I said.

"Our men were very thorough."

"Not thorough enough. I'm going to rent a boat at Las Croabas and make another search offshore of the marina."

"I'd like to come with you," Blaine said. "I haven't anything pressing here."

"Fine," I said, "I'll pick you up in front of Huntford in half an hour."

Las Croabas is a little protected harbor just north of Fajardo and very close to Marina Las Gaviotas. It used to be a favorite anchorage for small fishing boats, but nowadays most of the fishermen rent their boats by the day to people who want to sail, fish, or motor off shore. A lot of them go out in parties to sunbathe and swim at Cayo Icacos. Renting to pleasure seekers pays better than fishing these days in Puerto Rico.

We had our choice of boats. I selected an eighteen foot Boston Whaler with a forty horse-



power Mercury motor. Its owner looked like a character out of Hemingway: old with a short grizzled beard, but still well muscled and dyed mahogany by the sun. He wore a dirty, faded-blue shirt and baggy pants rolled up below the knees, and his face broke into a sunny smile as Blaine passed him the forty dollars for the boat and another five for gasoline.

We putted out of the harbor at low speed and then turned south toward Las Gaviotas. It was a magnificent day; gulls glided overhead and a cool breeze fanned across the boat. Roger Blaine looked happy in spite of his troubles, as if he were somehow in his element. Less than ten minutes found us in sight of the marina.

"What now?" Blaine asked.

"Now we try to think of what we'd do with that program if we were Johnny Rivera sitting out here chewing on a lot of fear and insecurity."

"A buoy!" Blaine said. "We passed two big ones coming down. And there's another way off there to the left."

"A waste of time," I said. "Your men would surely have checked those."

"What about along the reef?" he suggested. "There must be myriads of places to hide it there."

"That's just the problem: too many, and it all looks the same.

Anyway I'm sure your men must have cruised over all the reef near here."

"The place may not be marked. As you said, Johnny may have done a triangulation."

"If that's the case, you can forget about your program. It'll rot in a jungle of coral and seaweed."

"Don't say that," Blaine grimaced.

"We have to presume Johnny marked the place in some way. I think he'd be likely to do that; in his state of mind I don't think he'd trust himself to a triangulation that he might easily forget or confuse later."

"It's not marked," Blaine said, discouraged. "Our men were out here all day."

"Were they out there?" I pointed to several tiny islands.

"I imagine they were."

"If I were going to hide that program," I said, "I'd prefer twenty feet of water to five hundred. I'd want to make it easy for me to recover, but very safe from everyone else. Let's cruise close to them."

I directed the boatman, who obviously wondered what the hell we were up to, and he swung us toward the nearest island. Rough rock walls, scrub, patches of sand, clear blue water. We circled it, and I didn't see anything that resembled a man-made mark. We tried two more

islands with the same result. By then it was past one o'clock and we were broiling under the white sun.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing, as we approached a fourth island.

"What's what?" Blaine asked, shading his red eyes with a red hand.

But as we drew nearer, he too made out a strange scraping on the rock wall facing us. It wasn't very discernible and could very well be the result of natural causes. But I couldn't figure out just what natural cause would produce that kind of scraping.

I told the boatman to pull in next to the rock and anchor. He smiled quizzically but followed my instructions. What the hell, he had his forty-five dollars.

I stood in the bobbing boat and pointed down to a dark split in the rock wall a few feet below the surface. It looked like an underwater cave, large enough for a man to enter.

"I think we may have hit the jackpot," I said as I pulled my shirt off and threw it on the boat seat. I laid my .357 Magnum on top of the shirt (which made the boatman's eyes pop) and stripped the rest of the way down to my bathing suit.

"I wouldn't go," Roger Blaine said. "God knows what's in there."

I pulled on my mask and told him to pass me the flashlight.

"We'll soon find out."

I went over into the warm sun-swimming water, filled my lungs with air, and dived.

Utter darkness. The heave of the waves banged me into the narrow rock walls. Under the flashlight beam, the rock glowed with some sort of phosphorescent material. Tiny tropical fish fled the light, and black sea urchin needles rayed from crevices.

I felt a momentary panic of claustrophobia, but there was no time for that. The cave was only about ten feet deep, and at the end of it my flashlight picked out a large green rubber bag wrapped tight shut with thin wire. My lungs and temples ached, and I forced my body around in the narrowness and shot for the mouth.

"I think we've found it," I sputtered as I came up. "Just let me catch my breath."

"Thank God," Blaine said.

I cleared the mask, filled my lungs again, and reentered the black hole. I really don't like tight places. In half a minute I was out again with the rubber sack, which weighed as if it were filled with lead. There'd been no danger of its washing out of there.

I resurfaced to the muzzle of my .357 Magnum pointing directly at my mask.

"Throw it on board, Mr. Bannon."

I threw it, with some difficulty.

"I guess that's about it," Blaine said. "Goodbye."

I saw him pull the trigger twice, but nothing happened except a couple of clicks. Empty guns don't fire well. I grabbed hold of the gunwale with both hands and pulled down hard. Blaine lost his balance and fell to his knees, half out of the boat. The boatman jumped him from behind and all but sat on him, swearing in Spanish. I told him I'd give him another fifty dollars when we got in, and his accustomed grizzled smile returned.

"So you knew it was Blaine," Alma said that evening.

"Only after Ellen Howes was killed. She had to be working with someone because she was carrying the gun that had killed Johnny, but a *man* had shot Johnny at the motel. Who was a more likely confederate than Blaine, who was following my every move in the case. It turns out Ellen Howes was a former girlfriend of his."

"A very neat trap," Alma complimented me. "Why did he do it? He was well enough off."

"Guys like Blaine never have

enough. He started in the slums of New Jersey. It was plain old greed. He knew Johnny Rivera would have the computer program on his boat Saturday, and hired some punk to knock off Johnny and get the program. Blaine waited at the marina for the punk's return, but Johnny came back instead. Then Blaine guessed what had happened and followed Johnny to the motel, where he killed him. He expected to find the computer program at the motel, but didn't. At that point he didn't know what to think. Maybe Johnny didn't take the program with him. Blaine goes to Johnny's apartment and searches that. Still no program. He even goes back out to Las Gaviotas and searches the boat. By now he's desperate—but not for long, because suddenly I show up and *tell* him where it has to be: in the ocean. The rest you know."

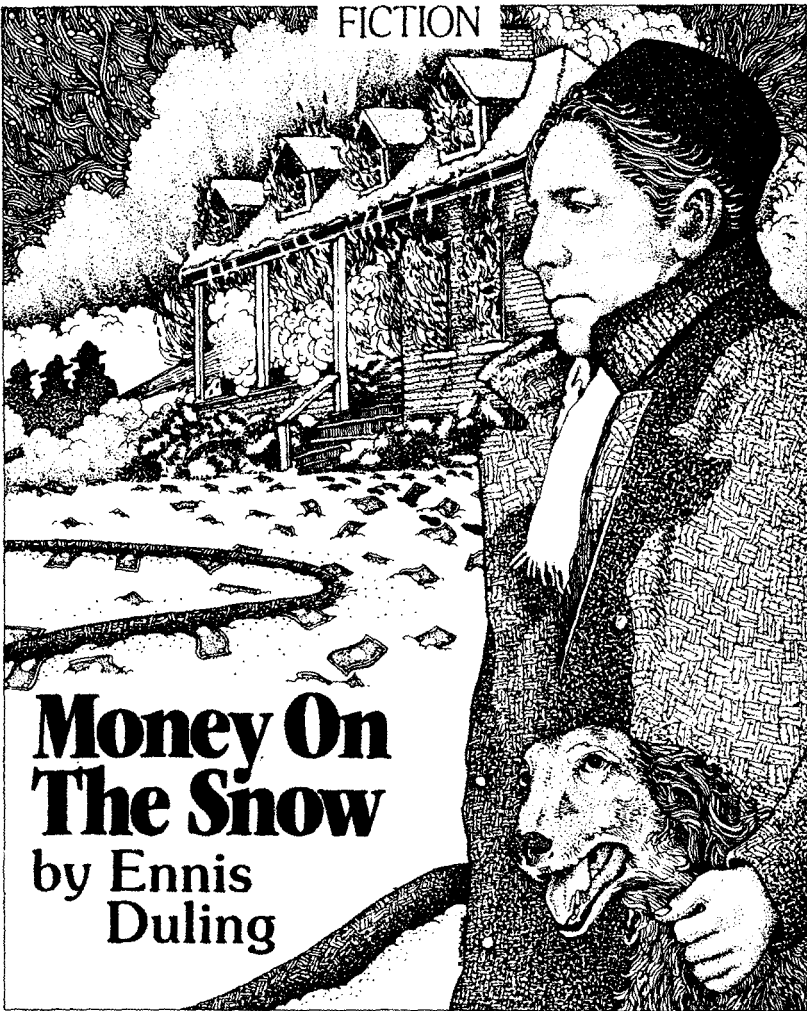
"I just don't know what makes you so brilliant," Alma said, putting her arm around my neck.

"Clean air, exercise, and salty women," I said.

She hit me.

A week later they found the washed-up body of the man Johnny had tossed overboard. He looked much the worse for wear.

FICTION



# Money On The Snow

by Ennis Duling

**I**da Pratt picked up the phone as her brother Cliff ran down the hall in his pajamas. "Fire department," she said.

She wasn't actually in the fire house—a two bay garage near the abandoned freight depot—but was in her own home standing beside a framed, hooked-rug scene of a sailboat.

A gravelly voice said, "There's a chimney fire at Art Herbert's. The flames are shooting ten feet above the roof." There was a click and the caller was gone. All over town, for the next few minutes, volunteer firemen were stumbling out of bed and reaching

*Illustration by Kurt Wallace*

for their phones while Ida repeated the information over and over, adding directions to Herbert's, just as if there were someone in town who didn't know old Art or his ramshackle house on the Lake Road. By the time she was done, Cliff was dressed and out the door.

She was surprised to see it was only three A.M.—lonely nights in January seemed endless. She glanced out the kitchen window at the thermometer next to the clear plastic bird feeder that was attached to the window with a suction cup. Ten degrees below zero.

She put on longjohns, red flannel hunting pants, and a bulky sweater. People in town liked to tease the firemen: "Ida and her coffee wagon beat you there every time, don't they?"

Ida was tall and thin, thirty-two and unmarried. In high school, where she had been captain of the girls' basketball team, she had picked up the nickname "Elbows." It had something to do with how she'd spring in the air after the ball and land with her feet planted and her elbows out. She'd always hated the name but had done nothing about it but blush. Other girls had bodies with curves, she'd decided. She had bony elbows.

Men didn't pay her much attention except the brotherly kind. As far as she could tell, no one ever stopped to wonder what she was doing standing out in below-zero weather heating up coffee. Wouldn't your sister do that sort of thing for you?

Only one man had recently treated her any differently, and that episode had depressed her for days.

Ida had been in Art Herbert's house two Sundays earlier to serve the sick old man a supper cooked by her church group. She hadn't realized he was bedridden until she had arrived.

His room had an odor like the smell copper pennies leave on your hands. Sitting up in bed, his mouth full of turkey, he said, "Can't trust anyone in this town. I trust this dog here and that's it." He reached across the bed and fed a piece of meat to a shaggy mutt whose white muzzle showed his age. "And you know what? He agrees. Old Sam don't trust but one or two people himself."

When he was done eating, Art Herbert gently lowered Sam to the floor. "It's cold in this room, Ida."

"I'll get you an extra blanket and put some wood in the stove before I go."

"I mean a body gets cold in a way blankets don't touch." Then he reached between the mattress and the box springs and pulled out a wad of money, tattered and limp with age.

The money didn't surprise her especially, nor did the proposition.

People said Art Herbert had money. You could hear people claim he had two thousand dollars jammed in a cookie jar in the kitchen, five thousand under his mattress, twenty thousand in a duffel bag in the closet. You could hear almost any figure you wanted to for his net worth, but you could also hear he didn't have one cent in the bank. Rumor had it that Dr. Martinson, Reverend Richards, and bank president Hatcher had made a joint call on Art to convince him to deposit his thousands. They had been unsuccessful—or so people said.

"Bet you didn't know I had this, did you?" he said to Ida, shaking the money. "Poor old Art, people say."

Without a word, she gathered the church's plates and silverware.

"I don't plan to part with any of it to just anyone," he said. "But you're kind and goodlooking, even if you are a mite skinny."

She reached out and touched his stubbled face gently. "I'm sorry, Mr. Herbert. I really am."

Sam was seated by the bedroom door, and as Ida walked toward him, he bared his brown teeth soundlessly and slipped behind her. Silently he followed her down the hall. At the front door Ida looked back up the steps. Sam was on the landing watching her with his tail between his legs.

And now Art Herbert's chimney, maybe his house, was on fire.

When she got to Herbert's, the pumper and the water truck were already there. The air was so clear the stars seemed a short distance above the brick chimney, from which shot a volcano of fire and black smoke. The lights were on in Art's room, but there was an orange glow behind all the windows. She noticed Sam crouching off by himself under the runningboard of his master's old pickup.

Ida watched her brother and Junior Abrams, owner of Abrams Energy Supply Company, smash the pane of glass in the front door. They switched on a light and darted into the black smoke. Worried about Cliff, Ida ran across the road and stood in the foot-deep snow. Firemen put a ladder up against the house and climbed to Art's window, which, for some reason, was already open.

There were flames by then, and the house looked as if it were lit up for the holidays.

Cliff and Junior Abrams staggered out, coughing. "We don't see him! There's no going up the stairs," Junior said.

The man on the ladder yelled down, "He's not in his room, either. Get a hose up here."

Ida glanced down for a second, then knelt and picked up a five dollar bill. The ground under Art's window was littered with money. The firemen were trampling it into the snow.

Ida gathered a handful of cash as if she were picking fallen apples from under a tree. She set out a can for it on the tailgate of her jeep and, turning back to her coffee-making, brought a pot of water to the boil.

The boys were too busy with the fire, which had appeared through the roof near the chimney, to worry about the money. But she knew they'd start bringing the cash over when things settled down a bit.

**F**red Newell was the first to the coffee wagon. He stuffed a fistful of money in the can. "I reckon I just paid you fifty bucks for a cup of coffee, Elbows."

He was a thin-faced man, about Ida's age, who seemed swallowed up in his black fireman's coat and hat. Ida always figured he was in the fire company because Junior Abrams, his former boss, encouraged his employees to join. Now that Newell was laid off and collecting unemployment, Ida wondered why he didn't quit.

Newell peeled off his gloves and blew on his hands while Ida poured the coffee. "You hear he's dead?" he said.

"Mr. Herbert?"

"Yeah, Junior put a ladder up against the back of the house and looked through into the upstairs hall. Art's body was lying on the floor. When Junior broke the window, he was almost blown off the ladder by the heat. Old man Herbert was gone a long time ago. No way to save him."

"How awful!"

"Yeah. You know we tried to warn him. You don't know how many times Junior and me came down to tell him to get his chimney cleaned, maybe stop burning wood and spring for an oil burner. I told Junior it was a waste of time talking to that skinflint. The only thing he loves is that damned dog. That's what I said."

The roof was completely ablaze by then, and crews of firemen were spraying the barn and outbuildings to keep them from catching fire from the showers of sparks.

"The old fool had it coming," Newell said, "though I don't want to talk ill of the dead. I bet he hadn't had that chimney cleaned in three or four years. Said he couldn't afford the fifty bucks! The creosote could have built up two inches thick inside. Get a good fire going and whoosh! There'd be no stopping it. And that chimney was none too good. No liner or anything. It just let the fire out."



"You think he got up in the middle of the night and lit a big fire in the woodstove," Ida said, trying to think of something other than Art Herbert's body in the upstairs hall.

"Probably has to get up once or twice in the middle of the night—sick old man like that most likely has trouble in the water-works—and threw all the wood he could in the stove, opened the damper wide, and went back to bed. Like I said, whoosh! Once the creosote in the chimney started burning, the house was as good as gone. We ain't doing no good here. Damn fire department might as well stayed in bed."

"Maybe you could help save the barn," Ida said sharply.

"Yeah. I guess someone inherits." He threw the rest of the coffee on the snow. "They should make you fire chief, Elbows. You'd keep everyone in line."

**A**n hour later the town's only police car pulled off the road next to her. Matt Jensen, the chief of the three-man force, got out and spoke to her over the top of the car.

"Good evening, Ida, or morning or whatever it is." He was several inches shorter than Ida and a little paunchy. His red and blue ski cap was pulled down so low it nearly covered his bushy eyebrows. Ida knew something of his life and would have happily known more. Divorced, Matt Jensen spent every day off with his children, who lived with their mother somewhere in New Hampshire. "I heard there's money all over the place," he said.

"I have some of it here." She held up the can.

Matt smiled sadly. "I can picture him in his nightshirt, standing in the open window, baling out money. How much do you think there is?"

"Lots. The boys have been bringing it over by the handful. I bet there's a couple thousand, maybe more."

"Strange way to die. He was so busy saving his money, he didn't bother to save himself until it was too late. Smoke inhalation must be a terrible way to die."

"Can I get you a cup of coffee, chief?" Ida asked.

"I don't think I've done much to deserve a break," he said. "Sitting in a heated car with the blinker going while the boys put out the fire hardly qualifies me."

"Modesty will get you a doughnut as well," Ida said.

A station wagon pulled off the road a short distance away. Bill Herbert, a middle-aged man in a wool suburban coat and a Tyrolean hat, jumped out and rushed up to Matt.

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"How much of Uncle Art's money have you found, Chief Jensen? I expect you to protect it."

"I have some bad news for you about your uncle, Mr. Herbert," Matt said solemnly.

Bill Herbert's face was unmoved so far as Ida could tell. "*He is dead then?*"

Matt nodded and Ida stared at the ground.

"I guess I should be grief-stricken or something," Bill Herbert said in the silence. "He was my uncle, even though he wouldn't do a thing for me. I'm sorry to hear of anyone's death."

Ida thought of offering coffee and then realized how out of place it would sound.

Matt spoke. "Ida thinks she might have a couple of thousand in the can."

"What happened to the rest of it? I know for a fact Uncle Art was worth forty or fifty times that much. I think he insulated the walls with cash."

"Burned," Matt said softly.

"All of it?"

Without answering, Matt looked over at the house. Only the chimney and a few heavy timbers remained standing as the firemen continued to wet down the smoking wreckage.

"So he took it with him after all," Bill Herbert said.

"I doubt he looked at it that way," Ida said.

Bill Herbert crossed the road and stood on the glacier of frozen black water that had flowed from the hoses across Art's yard. If there was any money there, it was locked in water until spring.

Ida watched him walk toward a shed near the barn. Like a ghost Art's dog slunk into the darkness at his approach.

**T**he sky was lightening a little when Ida spoke with Matt again. He was standing off by himself, his arms folded as if they were resting on his stomach. "You look like you're on a serious mission, Ida," he said.

"I guess I am, chief," she said. A minute before she had switched on the light inside her jeep and fiddled with her hair in the rear view mirror. Hopeless, she'd decided. And she wasn't sure what neat hair had to do with what she'd come to say. "I don't think this was an accident," she said so quietly she wondered for a second if Matt had heard her.

"It's never really an accident when someone's careless with fire," Matt said heavily.

"I mean it was murder."

"That's what I thought you meant. I don't need this. The town doesn't need it."

He sounded annoyed, and Ida wished she hadn't spoken. She always claimed to detest gossip. Sometimes she'd bang a cup of coffee on the counter of the Colonial Diner, which she owned and ran with her brother, and say to a customer, "That's just the kind of mean gossip I won't allow in my restaurant." People joked about her attitude, she suspected. She was probably an object of more than a little gossip herself.

And now she had accused someone in town of murder.

"Come on, let's go sit in my car," he said. "I better hear this, much as I don't want to."

He turned on the ignition. "We'll have some heat in a few minutes. Now what's your thinking?"

Ida stared out the frosted window at the black shape of an elm tree. "The dog was outside," she said.

"My experience with dogs is they always have to go out at the wrong time—certainly in the middle of the night."

"But the only light was upstairs."

"You lost me, Ida."

"Art Herbert loved that old dog. It's ten degrees below zero. If he had let him out, he would have stayed downstairs with him. Another light would have been on."

"So?"

"So another person was in the house. He let the dog out."

"And from that you've built a murder case! I don't want to be hard on you, Ida, but listen to some facts. First, the fire was certainly a chimney fire. You saw the flames shooting out of the chimney. I'll make sure the fire marshal checks it, but that's how it started."

"Couldn't you start a chimney fire by stuffing cardboard or paper in the stove and opening the damper?"

"Maybe," Matt said, "but that doesn't mean it happened. And I've got a second and a third. What about all the money on the snow? You mean someone murdered Art while he was throwing money out the window?"

"I think the murderer threw the money out the window."

"Whatever for?"

"So no one would think it was murder," Ida said. "He killed Mr. Herbert, stole as much money as he could, threw a few thousand out the window, and then started a roaring fire in the stove. Maybe

he even splashed some gasoline around inside the house to help the fire along. My guess is that he called the fire department so everyone could see it was an accident."

"Who did call in the fire?"

"He didn't say. He hung up right away."

"That's not strange," Matt said. "You'd be surprised how many anonymous calls we get at the police station. Even in a town this size, there are people who won't give their names. But I've got to admit your theory could have been the way it happened."

"You don't mean I'm convincing you?"

"I said *could*! Little green men *could* have set the fire. You've got nothing but a *could*. There are no witnesses."

"Except the dog," Ida said.

Matt slapped the steering wheel and laughed. "What are we going to do, put the dog on the witness stand? 'Please sink your teeth into the leg of the person who murdered your master, Mr. Dog.'"

"But the dog wouldn't do that. He likes the murderer. I've been watching him off and on all night. Whenever anyone gets near him, he runs off. No one could have caught him inside the house to throw him out. He must have followed someone he trusted to the door, and the friend let him out and then killed Mr. Herbert."

"What are we going to do, lead the dog around town and see whose hand he licks?"

"We don't have to do that, Matt."

The sun hadn't come over the horizon yet, but it was light enough to see Sam standing loyally next to Junior Abrams. Junior—who had visited Art many times and whose business was in such bad shape he was laying men off—reached down and stroked Sam's head with his gloved hand.

"I'll give his name to the State Police," Matt said. "It may be a little early to be sure, but I think you just solved a murder."

"I'm a good guesser," Ida said. Looking at Junior Abrams and the dog, she suddenly felt like crying, but she wasn't sure why. For some hopelessly sentimental reason, she thought—because a man who loved dogs was also a murderer; because an old man hoarded money, forgot to live, and then died; because she was alone.

Matt reached out and touched her arm. "Life's never easy," he said.

# SARATOGA INCIDENT

by Robert Gray



**“H**ow’s it going out there?”

Laura Cavanaugh’s voice trailed indistinctly to the kitchen from the living room, where she was addressing invitations for a party they would be giving the Tuesday after Traverse Stakes weekend.

Henri was chopping vegetables for stirfry. Sesame oil had begun to sizzle in a large wok on the stove, and the blender was mixing his infamous tarragon salad dressing. He couldn’t hear what his wife was saying because of the noise, and

also because he was thinking about a sign he would like to put on the lawn in front of their renovated Victorian home, a sign reading “Cavanaugh, Inc. Fine Dining and Discreet Investigation.”

“What?” he yelled back.

“I said how’s it going?”

He still didn’t understand. Maybe he was going deaf. Henri would be fifty years old in a couple of months but kept trying to convince himself that he didn’t feel it, except of course for his back and bad knee . . . and maybe now his hearing.

*Illustration by Ray Lago*

He had thick brown hair that was streaked with gray and a little shaggy, but it softened the tanned, chiseled features of his gaunt face. Tall and lanky, he wore baggy clothes that disguised the surprising hardness of his body. He hadn't let himself go . . . yet.

He finished slicing the last celery stalk. Next to the cutting board he now had separate piles of pork strips, zucchini, mushrooms, celery, onions, carrots, and pea pods. The oil was ready, but he turned off the heat and went into the living room to see what Laura wanted.

She was perched on the edge of the sofa at the coffee table, which had disappeared under the deluge of envelopes and invitations. Laura was ten years younger than her husband, her pretty Irish face enhanced by longish red hair, blue eyes, and a glowing smile. She was tall, what used to be called statuesque, and her voice was low and raspy. She had a quiet confidence in her manner but could be intimidating when she chose to be.

"What did you just ask me?" said Henri, walking over to the bar and pouring them each a scotch and soda.

Laura glanced up from her work with a puzzled expression.

"What did I . . . oh, nothing. Just wondered how you were doing."

"Oh."

"Do you believe all this?" she said, waving a hand over the chaotic paper mound as if she could make it disappear. "Every year we end up inviting more and more people to this foolish party. Doesn't anyone ever stay home at night in this town?"

"Nobody I know," said Henri.

Laura sealed another envelope and added it to the growing stack, then sat back on the sofa and accepted the drink he offered her. She raised the glass in silent toast and sipped.

Born and raised in Saratoga, Laura was a member in good standing of the social elite. Left at an early age with a generous inheritance and good family name, she had lived a privileged, uneventful life under their protective wing until one summer evening a dozen years ago.

That was the night Henri, a private detective from New York, had crashed a party she was attending at a friend's mansion on North Broadway. In the middle of an elegant ballroom, to the brief accompaniment of "In The Mood," he had stormed across the dance floor and leveled an honored guest with a single punch.

She learned later that the victim was a big-time gambler who had seriously injured Henri's brother over a debt, but there was no explanation that night. He simply dragged the man out by the collar of his tux.

Laura was intrigued by this unlikely drama. She followed them and, to her own everlasting surprise, offered the services of her Mercedes as a paddy wagon.

The gambler was quickly released due to lack of evidence, and Henri escaped formal assault charges only because the victim wasn't interested in calling further attention to himself. It was not exactly a storybook romance, but Henri and Laura were married that autumn.

Over the years, Laura had managed to smooth out a few of his rough edges and he had drawn out a few of hers. They made a good team. With experience, they had learned to work comfortably at both ends of the Saratoga spectrum, from stablehands to stable owners.

Henri finished his drink and returned to the kitchen. He fired up the stove and poured in some fresh oil. When it was hot, he began adding the vegetables, starting with the carrots, which would take longer to cook.

When their doorbell chimed the call to the post, "Boots and Saddles," Laura got up to answer. She found Maddie Worthington standing on the doorstep, smiling the way people do when they're not all that happy. Maddie was a tiny, pale-skinned woman, at least eighty years old. As usual, she was bedecked

in a jewelry store's worth of precious gems, as well as the ever-present wide-brimmed hat under which she almost disappeared.

"Maddie, so nice to see you," Laura said, stepping aside. "Come into the living room and I'll fix you a drink. I'm just finishing the invit—"

"No, please, Laura, this isn't a social call. Could we talk in your office?"

Laura nodded and showed her into the large, book-lined study. She offered Maddie a seat, then excused herself to fetch Henri. When they returned, the old woman was pacing slowly but nervously in front of the oak desk that served as the nerve center, so to speak, of their enterprise. Henri extended his hand.

"I don't think we've met. I'm Henri, Laura's . . ."

"Yes, I know. Laura talks of you often at the club. So nice to meet you."

When they were seated, with Laura in the desk chair and Henri and Maddie occupying two leather "client" chairs in front, the old woman spoke.

"I know what you do . . . I mean, I've heard you're very good at performing certain small favors for people."

Fumbling nervously in her purse, she removed an envelope which she placed on the desk, mumbling something about a down payment.



"What's the problem, Maddie?" asked Laura, ignoring the envelope. Henri sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette. He would watch this one, since the client came from Laura's world.

"Well, I'm not sure, really," Maddie began, dabbing at her eyes with a silk handkerchief. It gave off a perfumed scent that quickly enveloped the room. "You know I own several race horses, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Laura. "Worthington Stables is a very respected name here."

"And do you know my trainer, Evan Daniels?"

Laura flashed a quick glance at Henri, who nodded.

"Yes, we've heard of him."

"Well, he's been with me for almost a year now, ever since George Barton passed away. I had George for nearly forty years. He was the finest sort of man. Evan is a good boy, too, don't get me wrong, but lately he's been acting very strangely."

"How do you mean?" asked Laura.

"Well, I'm worried about one horse in particular, Moody Heiress. Call me a sentimental old fool, but George and I were in the stall the night she was foaled. He named her after me as a kind of a private joke. I've watched her grow . . . such a sweet temperament for a thoroughbred . . . and of course now she's like a final link to George . . ."

A dreamy, slightly vacant look crossed her face. Henri thought this a good time to offer drinks. She quickly accepted. Anything would do, she said. Henri walked over to the roll-top desk where they kept a small bar and poured scotch into three glasses, adding a dash of soda to each. Then he passed them around.

This was done without further conversation. Maddie and the Cavanaughs seemed to be measuring one another. Maddie drained her glass in two swallows, as if she were trying to draw strength from the harsh sensation. Henri offered a refill, but she declined.

"What about Moody Heiress?" said Laura. She reached for a pad and pencil.

"It may not be anything at all, but I'm concerned. George was a darling about letting me hover around the stables. He knew how I felt about my horses. Evan, however, is another breed. He says he's committed to turning my operation into a money-maker. He doesn't exactly respect the job George did with them."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning my horses don't win very often, I'm afraid. George wasn't one to push them. He was kind and gentle and conscientious, but he lacked that killer instinct when it came to forcing an animal to its limits and beyond."

"You sound disappointed. Why did you keep him all those years?"

Maddie stared at her hands, which were bony and mottled with age spots. She was a proud woman and public confessions did not come easy.

"George and I . . . Well, things were different when I was young and we . . . I guess I can tell you in strictest confidence that we were . . . together . . . all those years, through my two so-called 'good' marriages and all. I suppose, in the beginning at least, the horses were nothing more to me than an excuse to be with him."

This confession extracted a price. She looked even older suddenly, defeated. Laura got her off the hook.

"Maddie, what about Evan Daniels? What's the problem?"

"He was highly recommended by a horseman I met at George's funeral, a Louis Baldonna. He told me Evan was just the person I needed right then. He was young, a hard worker, and had spent many years as an assistant trainer in some of the top barns. I was too depressed over George's death to think. It was easier to get that out of the way."

Laura was going to ask why she didn't assert her rights as owner and put the kid in his place. But one look at the fragile lady sitting there and she knew that wasn't an option.

"What would you like us to do?" Laura asked.

"Nothing much, I suppose. I wish you could just keep an eye on my horses for a while, to be sure they're not being mistreated."

"Why do you suspect they are?"

"It's probably just the senile exaggerations of an old woman, but I'm worried about Moody in particular. You're going to think this sounds ridiculous, but the last time I saw her she looked more energetic than she ever had. I'm afraid Evan might be using some kind of drug, but I have no proof."

"Mrs. Worthington, you mentioned something about Evan's not wanting you around the barn," said Henri. "Tell me, how long has it been since you last saw your horses?"

"He had allowed me relatively free access right up to the Belmont Stakes last June. The week after that, I mentioned Moody's changing temperament, and he looked angry. That was when he said that if I wanted winners, I had to get used to his properly conditioning them. He said Moody was just responding well to harder workouts. Then he asked me to stay away for a while so I wouldn't distract her. He said that my presence would make her think of the good old lazy days with George and that she'd react badly."

"And you think he's using an undetectable drug . . ."

"I don't know what to think. I simply want to be sure that isn't the case—What's that?"

"What?"

"I heard something like crackling."

"The stirfry!"

Henri jumped from his chair and ran to the kitchen, which was filling with smoke. He lifted the wok off the heat, set it out on the back porch, and left the door open. When he returned to the study, Maddie was gone, along with her envelope of money. Laura had no respect for wages.

"Did my cooking scare her off?" he said.

"Possibly. No, she'd told us all she knows. What do you think?"

"I think we should call out for Chinese." Henri flopped down in his chair. "What are the parties on tap for tonight?" he asked. "Specifically, where are we invited?"

Laura opened the datebook on the desk.

"The Vandermeers at their home; Breeders and Owners dinner downtown, and some kind of lawn party tied in with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Performing Arts Center. Why?"

"You haven't been to the Breeders dinner in years, have you?"

"Henri, darling; we've never

been to that thing. Two hundred people in a room seriously discussing cracked sesamoids, rich bloodlines, and distemper shots is not my idea of a marvelous night out."

"You'll love it. Trust me."

"I'll love it? What about you?"

"Try to get a line on this Louis Baldonna. Find out who's with him and where he's spending his time."

"What if he isn't there?"

"Louis Baldonna is, in order of importance, a bookie, a gambler, and a horseowner. The last one will get him in the door, the other two are the reasons he wouldn't miss it. I'm sure he prefers good connections to good sex."

"I'll take your word for it. And just where will you be spending the evening?"

"Waiting for a bus."

**I**t was nearly six thirty that evening when a bus from New York pulled into its parking spot on a side street downtown. Under a Greyhound sign, a couple of dozen men had gathered, waiting anxiously. When it had come to a full stop, they edged closer, all of them trying to look inconspicuous; just a group of guys waiting for their mother or sister or that package from Aunt May.

What they were actually waiting for was the last passenger off the bus, a short, heavy man in a soiled raincoat. He

gave each of them an envelope; an envelope for which they were willing to shell out upwards of four hundred dollars a day. These were Saratoga's high rollers, and the precious envelopes contained rating numbers for tomorrow's race card. They had been sent up by one of the top professional handicappers in the business.

One of those waiting, a tiny old man, didn't get an envelope, though he was in the middle of the action. No one seemed to notice. The group dispersed in an instant, and the old man shuffled along the sidewalk, favoring a stiff right leg. When he reached Broadway, he stepped off the curb and, opening the door of Henri's car, slid quickly in, his leg miraculously healed.

Henri pulled into traffic and drove away. The car radio was picking up static-shrouded WNEW from New York. Peggy Lee was wondering if that was all there was to life. She advised that he keep dancing, break out the booze, and have a ball. Sound advice.

"Nice limp, Jeff," he said.

Jeffrey Dalton was a valuable recent addition to the Cavanaugh organization. He had outgrown a promising career as a jockey by the age of nineteen. At twenty, he'd moved to Saratoga.

His dream now was to be an actor, but in the city they

said he was too small. Before meeting the Cavanaughs, Jeff had been waiting tables and spending his weekends with a regional theater group nearby. Henri had put his considerable talent to better use.

"Thanks," he said. "*Richard III*, way, way off Broadway last year... New Jersey, in fact. Appropriate in this town, though. My kingdom for a horse and all that."

Jeff had retained the instincts of his first profession and continually added what he was learning from his second. He still knew how to take the calculated risk; how to go between symbolic horses when given a crack of daylight; when to stay outside; when to hug the rail; and, most important, when to check up and save his mount for another race.

"What did you get?" asked Henri, looking at the wizened old face beside him and trying to remember that it belonged to a twenty-year-old.

"Baldonna wasn't there, like you guessed, but two of his boys were. One was a huge mother. Leaned against the wall the whole time, wouldn't speak to anybody; a real stiff. I talked to the other one, though, old guy named Eddie. I guess he figured we had senility in common. I made up a few juicy stories to get him started, and he loosened right up. Found out that your Evan Daniels lost a big,

big wager a year and a half ago at Aqueduct.”

“So?”

“So he didn’t lose it at the windows. He was betting against a horse from the barn where he was working at the time and didn’t want to take a chance holding the tickets. He did his business through a bookie. You’ll never guess who.”

“Louis Baldonna.”

“None other. And not only that, but word is that Baldonna took a good piece of the action on a marker, since Daniels didn’t have a lot of cash. Evidently they’d done business before.”

Henri lit a cigarette and turned the volume down on Tony Bennett.

“So what we have here is Evan Daniels owing big money to Louis, yet Louis recommends him for the Worthington stable. You think he’s just a kind-hearted, forgiving sort of guy?”

“Heart o’ gold,” said Jeff. “No doubt about it. And you wondered about drugs? The old guy says Louis doesn’t go much for that. He sticks to inside information and stuff like those numbers they just picked up.”

“He’s a wonder man, isn’t he? If I ever have a kid, I’ll know where to look for a godfather, in every sense of the word.”

**H**enri didn’t try to cook breakfast the next morning. After the near disaster resulting from

his culinary efforts the night before, Laura seemed content to settle for a cup of coffee. She hinted that she might never eat again.

“You must’ve come in late last night,” said Henri. “I didn’t get to sleep till after one myself.”

Laura grinned and sipped her coffee.

“Well, my dear, your Mr. Baldonna was so charming I simply couldn’t tear myself away. And all that lovely dinner conversation about plugged digestive tracts and bleeders was utterly captivating.”

“Was he as informative as he was charming?”

“Actually, if the truth be known, he was completely unsocial, but I was honored with the company of his sprightly young companion for most of the night. She gave new, exaggerated meaning to the words blonde, breast, and boring. Next time you can go to the Breeders, dear heart, and I’ll sit in the bus station. I yawned till dawn.”

“But?”

“But she did say that they vacationed in sunny Mexico this winter, if that helps, near a track called Agua Caliente. Must have been mixing business with pleasure.”

Henri told her what he had picked up at the bus stop and then made some phone calls. The first was to Agua Caliente. He had worked a case down

there several years ago. During the course of that investigation, he had done a couple of favors for one of the track stewards. It was time to collect on the debt.

After that conversation, he dialed the number of the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau in New York and asked for Joe Weiss. The TRPB was an intelligence network that kept tabs on the racing industry. Henri had worked with them, through Weiss, in the past, whenever Cavanaugh connections were needed on a Saratoga case.

He told Weiss about Maddie Worthington's suspicions, as well as what he had dug up so far. He waited on the line while Joe checked a few things for him on their computer. When Henri had the information he was after, they rang off. Weiss would be in Saratoga tomorrow.

Laura came into the study with a tray of sandwiches and some coffee. She set the tray on the desk and settled into one of the leather chairs, nibbling a sandwich. Henri poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Isn't this fun?" she said, opening her notepad and smiling.

Henri preferred to think of them as hardboiled private eyes, but as usual, she was right. He nodded.

"You talk to Maddie this morning?" he asked.

"Yessir, as ordered. Let's see. She said Moody Heiress is a four-year-old mare who hasn't won since she was two; beaten in her last eight races by a total of a hundred and fifty lengths, but . . . but in her last two she came in fifth by seven lengths and fourth by six, her best finishes in a while. She's a chestnut with no distinguishing markings."

"And both of those races came while Maddie was encouraged to stay out of the barns and while she was getting concerned with Moody's nervous condition, right?"

"Give that boy a cee-gar."

"Now all we have to find out is when she's running next. Do you think. . . ?"

"Wednesday. She's entered in a race with better company than she's been seeing. Now, you wouldn't make a move up like that with a mediocre horse unless you were looking to build the odds."

"That gives us two days to get ready. Joe Weiss will be here tomorrow."

**"THEY'RE ALL IN LINE . . .**

**"THEY'RE OFF!"**

Through his binoculars, Henri watched the field of seven fillies and mares explode from the starting gate, a violent blur of dark thoroughbreds and multicolored silks.

Moody Heiress, who had gone

off at odds of twenty-one to one in the seven furlong sprint, quickly drew clear of her competition as they moved down the backstretch. But Henri could see that the jockey had a tight hold and wouldn't let her open more than a couple of lengths on the closely bunched field behind her.

He was standing in a crowd on the second level of the grandstand building, just behind the top row of seats. Wearing brown slacks and a yellow jersey, with a pencil tucked behind his ear and the *Racing Form* in his back pocket, he looked like any of the thousands around him, all waiting for a miracle. Laura was nearby somewhere, wearing a light summer dress and bonnet, the kind of woman who wouldn't give the time of day to a track rat like Henri.

The TRPB was there also, dispersed through the crowd. Weiss said the FBI would be involved, but so far Henri hadn't seen any brown suits.

Into the far turn, Moody Heiress had opened three lengths on the field. Henri saw the jockey look over his shoulder for some competition, worried about winning too handily. But as they came off the turn, a three-year-old chestnut filly, Ginger Peach, kicked to the outside and began closing strong down the center of the track.

Henri lowered his binoculars to watch the stretch run. At the

eighth pole, the two leaders were a diminishing length apart. The jockey on Ginger Peach was using his whip vigorously on the animal's flank, and with every stride she seemed to be cutting into her rival's advantage. They were head to head going past the sixteenth pole.

A tidal wave of noise swept down from the grandstand. As if drawing strength from the decibel level, Moody Heiress suddenly regained her stride and put a neck in front at the wire. Actually, Henri knew that her jockey had simply loosened his stranglehold on the horse and let her run the final strides on her own.

It was a great con, he thought, just the sort of race a horse might run if it had shown the kind of gradual improvement Moody Heiress had of late. There were many horses who found the Saratoga racetrack to their liking, who won there year after year, but had trouble elsewhere. Moody Heiress was just another in a long line of upset winners at the Spa, that traditional "Graveyard of the Favorites."

Or was she?

The crowd's roar subsided instantly, dwindling into a swirl of conversations. The people surrounding Henri dispersed on new quests—to cash their winning tickets, bet the next race, stand in line for bathrooms or bars. Taking advan-



tage of the exodus to move closer to the railing, Henri raised his binoculars again and scanned the crowd in Section K until he spotted Baldonna. He was sitting next to the blonde, his arm draped over her shoulders. She was laughing.

They left their seats and walked down the concrete steps to the paved area in front of the grandstand. As they came off the last step, three "old buddies" moved in behind them and—with arms locked chummily around him, talking loudly about the good old days—escorted Louis inside.

Laura emerged from a crowd nearby and gripped the little blonde's arm tight enough to make her flinch. Laura was smiling. Henri imagined her conversation leaning toward the wonderful time they'd had at the Breeders dinner, and how they would have to get together again real soon.

The race was official now. Moody Heiress paid \$44.80 to win. There was a collective gasp from the crowd and a few scattered shouts of joy. Louie wasn't shouting. He was holding a fortune in tickets he would never get to cash.

When Henri walked into the small office Weiss had commandeered as an interrogation room, he saw Baldonna sitting comfortably in an office chair. There was an ear-to-ear smirk pasted on his doughy face. A

stack of betting tickets lay on the desk next to him. The blonde and two of his business associates were sulking in the far corner, under heavy guard.

"He's had his rights read and all that," said Weiss. "You're the one with the script, Henri. Why don't you do the honors?"

Baldonna looked up at Henri, thoroughly unimpressed. Henri took out a cigarette, lit it, then sat on the edge of the desk.

"Mr. Baldonna, that's quite a collection of tickets you have there. I don't suppose any of them are on Moody Heiress?"

"Parimutuel wagering is legal in this state, or didn't nobody ever tell you that?" said Baldonna.

"What do you know about a lady named Worthington?"

"I can read. Saw her name in the program. She owns the horse that just won. So what?"

"She says you recommended Evan Daniels to her as a trainer last year."

"So?"

"And Mr. Daniels owed you a considerable sum of money at the time. That right?"

"He was good for it. I just did the kid a favor, that's all."

"And today he returned it?"

"He's a good trainer. What can I tell you?"

"He's so good that Mrs. Worthington thought Moody Heiress was drugged when she saw the horse two months ago. And shortly after that, she

wasn't even allowed in her own stable."

"What's that got to do with me? Talk to Daniels."

"Oh, we will, don't worry."

Baldonna shifted his considerable weight in the chair. His attention had perked up at the mention of drugs.

"So what if she thinks the horse is getting meatballs," he said. "It won the race. Now they'll test it, and you'll see it was clean. Can I go?"

Henri stood and walked to the other side of the room. He looked at Louie's friends. The two men were steel hard, but the girl was scared. She wouldn't look at him.

"Louie, I never said the horse was drugged. My client did. I want to tell you a little story, purely hypothetical, of course. Once upon a time, earlier this year to be more precise, a certain renowned gambler took a vacation south of the border. Now, a friend of mine at Agua Caliente told me this tourist expressed an interest in purchasing local horses that had no distinguishing marks; no stars or blazes or stockings and, curiously enough, no identification tattoos. My friend notified the FBI, but they found no evidence of wrongdoing there and let the matter slide."

Baldonna's easy expression had turned to stone. Henri knew he was going to start crying for a lawyer any second.

"I've got a lot of friends, Louie. You can't have too many, right? People who will stick with you when the chips are down, who will even do hard time just to protect your good name?"

There was a nervous cough from the far corner of the room; a female cough; a blonde cough.

"Weiss is my friend, Louie. He ran a computer check for me and found out that a small track in Ohio had its tattoo equipment ripped off more than a year ago. What a coincidence, huh? Since the track wasn't a member of the TRPB network, the case was handled by local security and never solved."

Louie yawned. He was nervous, thought Henri, not bored.

"Now put it all together, Louie. Fast Mexican mare with no distinguishing marks, stolen tattoo equipment, a trainer who owes you big, an owner who's too old, you think, to know what's going on, and best of all, Moody Heiress, a mediocre sprinter with no markings. You pulled the quick switch when the horse was being vanned somewhere, and suddenly Moody Heiress began to show gradual, carefully programmed improvement. Pretty smooth, I have to admit."

"You got nothin' but a good imagination," said Baldonna.

"We've got a track steward in Mexico who will testify you were there buying. We've got a nice old lady who's smarter

than you think, and who will testify, among other things, that you talked her into hiring Daniels. I wouldn't be surprised if we get Daniels and the jock before the day's through. I'd say that's pretty good, wouldn't you?"

Baldonna shrugged. He was thinking about a good lawyer, who could twist good evidence into circumstantial. Then, suddenly, he turned thirty shades of white as somebody moved behind Henri.

"And you got me, who saw it all," said the blonde. "I ain't takin' your rap, Louie."

**H**enri was not in the kitchen yet. He and Laura were having drinks in the living room. He was plotting a new culinary adventure while leafing through an old *Bon Appetit* magazine. Laura stared at the invitations on the coffee table. They had never left the house, due to her preoccupation with the case.

"You know what?" she said. "Everyone is going to hate us for not having a party this year."

"They won't even notice, believe me. They'll just have to spend that night at one of the dozen other soirees in town."

"I suppose . . . Still, it doesn't

seem right, somehow. What if we telephoned our invitations?"

"What about Stuffed Chicken Mandarin?"

The telephone rang and Laura picked it up. She talked for several minutes. Henri found a recipe for stuffed brook trout. He'd never cooked a trout before.

Laura hung up. She started arranging all the cards and envelopes into one manageable heap; then she stood, cradling the mess in her arms.

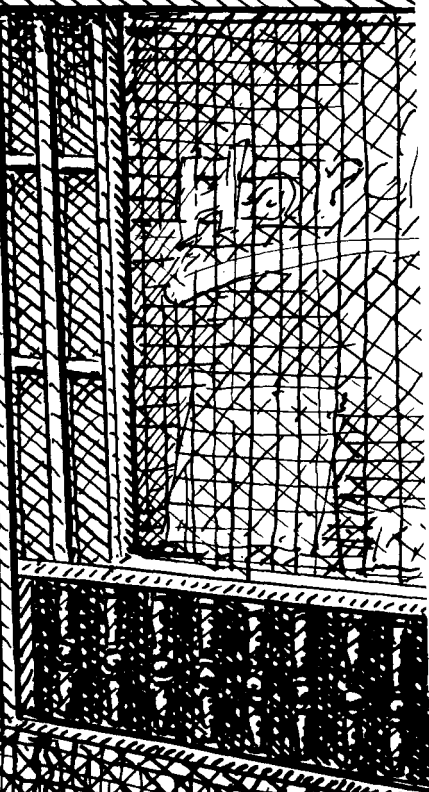
"How about. . . ?" said Henri, turning the magazine around to show her a centerfold of a splayed fish crammed with breadcubes and raisins.

"How about a deal," she replied, taking the magazine from his hands. "That was Maddie on the phone. She's having an intimate little bash at her place tonight for sixty people to celebrate her triumph over evil. We're the guests of honor. So . . . here's my deal. Starting now, and until the end of the season, I won't think about having a party and you won't cook, okay? We'll dump the invitations and the magazine as a symbol of our truce."

"But just think about what I could do with Stuffed Brook Trout."

"I just was," she said as she left the room.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# AFTER TWENTY YEARS

By O. Henry

Illustration by Bachrun Lomele

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**T**he policeman on the beat moved up the avenue impressively. The impressiveness was habitual and not for show, for spectators were few. The time was barely ten o'clock at night, but chilly gusts of wind with a taste of rain in them had well nigh depeopled the streets.

Trying doors as he went, twirling his club with many intricate and artful movements, turning now and then to cast his watchful eye adown the pacific thoroughfare, the officer, with his stalwart form and slight swagger, made a fine picture of a guardian of the peace. The vicinity was one that kept early hours. Now and then you might see the lights of a cigar store or of an all-night lunch counter; but the majority of the doors belonged to business places that had long since been closed.

When about midway of a certain block the policeman suddenly slowed his walk. In the doorway of a darkened hardware store a man leaned, with an unlighted cigar in his mouth. As the policeman walked up to him the man spoke up quickly.

"It's all right, officer," he said, reassuringly. "I'm just waiting for a friend. It's an appointment made twenty years ago. Sounds a little funny to you, doesn't it? Well, I'll explain if you'd like to make certain it's all straight. About that long ago there used to be a restaurant where this store stands—'Big Joe' Brady's restaurant."

"Until five years ago," said the policeman. "It was torn down then."

The man in the doorway struck a match and lit his cigar. The light showed a pale, square-jawed face with keen eyes, and a little white scar near his right eyebrow. His scarfpin was a large diamond, oddly set.

"Twenty years ago tonight," said the man, "I dined here at 'Big Joe' Brady's with Jimmy Wells, my best chum, and the finest chap in the world. He and I were raised here in New York, just like two brothers, together. I was eighteen and Jimmy was twenty. The next morning I was to start for the West to make my fortune. You couldn't have dragged Jimmy out of New York; he thought it was the only place on earth. Well, we agreed that night that we would meet here again exactly twenty years from that date and time, no matter what our conditions might be or from what distance we might have to come. We figured that in twenty years each of us ought to have our destiny worked out and our fortunes made, whatever they were going to be."

"It sounds pretty interesting," said the policeman. "Rather a long

time between meets, though, it seems to me. Haven't you heard from your friend since you left?"

"Well, yes, for a time we corresponded," said the other. "But after a year or two we lost track of each other. You see, the West is a pretty big proposition, and I kept hustling around over it pretty lively. But I know Jimmy will meet me here if he's alive, for he always was the truest, stanchest old chap in the world. He'll never forget. I came a thousand miles to stand in this door tonight, and it's worth it if my old partner turns up."

The waiting man pulled out a handsome watch, the lids of it set with small diamonds.

"Three minutes to ten," he announced. "It was exactly ten o'clock when we parted here at the restaurant door."

"Did pretty well out West, didn't you?" asked the policeman.

"You bet! I hope Jimmy has done half as well. He was a kind of plodder, though, good fellow as he was. I've had to compete with some of the sharpest wits going to get my pile. A man gets in a groove in New York. It takes the West to put a razor edge on him."

The policeman twirled his club and took a step or two.

"I'll be on my way. Hope your friend comes around all right. Going to call time on him sharp?"

"I should say not!" said the other. "I'll give him half an hour at least. If Jimmy is alive on earth he'll be here by that time. So long, officer."

"Good night, sir," said the policeman, passing on along his beat, trying doors as he went.

There was now a fine, cold drizzle falling, and the wind had risen from its uncertain puffs into a steady blow. The few foot passengers astir in that quarter hurried dismally and silently along with coat collars turned high and pocketed hands. And in the door of the hardware store the man who had come a thousand miles to fill an appointment, uncertain almost to absurdity, with the friend of his youth, smoked his cigar and waited.

About twenty minutes he waited, and then a tall man in a long overcoat, with collar turned up to his ears, hurried across from the opposite side of the street. He went directly to the waiting man.

"Is that you, Bob?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Is that you, Jimmy Wells?" cried the man in the door.

"Bless my heart!" exclaimed the new arrival, grasping both the other's hands with his own. "It's Bob, sure as fate. I was certain I'd find you here if you were still in existence. Well, well, well!—twenty years is a long time. The old restaurant's gone, Bob;

I wish it had lasted, so we could have had another dinner there. How has the West treated you, old man?"

"Bully; it has given me everything I asked it for. You've changed lots, Jimmy. I never thought you were so tall by two or three inches."

"Oh, I grew a bit after I was twenty."

"Doing well in New York, Jimmy?"

"Moderately. I have a position in one of the city departments. Come on, Bob; we'll go around to a place I know of, and have a good long talk about old times."

The two men started up the street, arm in arm. The man from the West, his egotism enlarged by success, was beginning to outline the history of his career. The other, submerged in his overcoat, listened with interest.

At the corner stood a drugstore, brilliant with electric lights. When they came into this glare each of them turned simultaneously to gaze upon the other's face.

The man from the West stopped suddenly and released his arm.

"You're not Jimmy Wells," he snapped. "Twenty years is a long time, but not long enough to change a man's nose from a Roman to a pug."

"It sometimes changes a good man into a bad one," said the tall man. "You've been under arrest for ten minutes, 'Silky' Bob. Chicago thinks you may have dropped over our way and wires us that she wants to have a chat with you. Going quietly, are you? That's sensible. Now, before we go to the station here's a note I was asked to hand to you. You may read it here at the window. It's from Patrolman Wells."

The man from the West unfolded the little piece of paper handed him. His hand was steady when he began to read, but it trembled a little by the time he had finished. The note was rather short.

Bob: I was at the appointed place on time. When you struck the match to light your cigar I saw it was the face of the man wanted in Chicago. Somehow I couldn't do it myself, so I went around and got a plainclothesman to do the job.

Jimmy

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**SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":**

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Blanche was the extortionist.



# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

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PATRICIA WENTWORTH

**M**iss Maud Silver, former governess turned sleuth, made her first appearance in 1929 in *The Grey Mask*, a sinister tale of conspiracy with a twisted psychopath at its center—and a shocking revelation of his identity. Creator Patricia Wentworth, who died in 1961, left a legacy of historical novels as well as mysteries. Out of seventy-five books, though, twenty-nine fortuitously featured the implacable Miss Silver.

Much of the charm of these novels lies in Miss Silver's immutability. Although she investigates crime in England for almost three decades, she changes little. In *The Lonesome Road* (1939), Miss Silver tells

a prospective client that she was "in the scholastic profession for twenty years," and confides that she "disliked it extremely." That may be so, but Maud Silver can boast of many old and dear friends from those days, both ex-pupils (and their growing families), and fellow spinsters and matrons who shared her schooldays.

In fact, as Maud doesn't advertise her skills, her clients tend to come from the wide circle of contacts made during that long period of involvement in "the scholastic profession."

Furthermore, Maud encourages the impression that she is just an ex-governess of very modest means—a wonderful disguise and one she assumes

by choice. It is her sincere preference: the adoption of plain and simple dresses, an old fashioned hairdo (wound tightly in a silk hairnet), lace collars fastened with a favorite brooch (a bog oak tree studded with a pearl), and lingerie trimmed with her own hand-crochet work. And readers cannot conjure up a picture of Miss Maud Silver without seeing in her lap her ubiquitous knitting bag and some half-finished project for an ex-pupil's child.

Add to these characteristics a lively intelligence, a realistic grasp of psychology, a healthy skepticism, and a quick curiosity—plus a quiet, unassuming manner (which allows Maud to “disappear” in a corner of a crowded drawing room), and an innate sympathy that inspires surprising trust in the talkative—and you have the ingredients of an offbeat, but very effective, private investigator.

The early novels, such as *The Grey Mask*, *Lonesome Road*, or *The Chinese Shawl*, rely on gothic elements for their plots: a conspiracy of evildoers, the peril of an ingenue trapped in an old family feud. Wentworth filled her pages with scenes of town and country life in England, and with characters who were stock types in those times. As the years passed, her eye remained keenly contemporary, and thus the later books

seem more “realistic” to modern readers. By this time, too, Maud Silver's reputation is made. She's independently comfortable, and forced to pick and choose the cases that come to her. Wentworth introduced two Scotland Yard men into the series: Chief Detective Inspector Lamb, who grumpily admits his respect for Miss Silver; and Detective Sergeant Frank Abbott, one of Maud's many young admirers, who teasingly refers to her as “Esteemed Preceptress.” The plots remain baroque, however, as in *The Listening Eye* (1955), when a deaf woman, an expert lip reader, “overhears” an alarming conversation held across a large room in an empty art gallery.

Though complex, the plots always manage to make the fantastic quite pleasantly plausible. *She Came Back* (1945) tells the tale of an heiress who “returns from the dead” to collect her inheritance and resume her married life with her husband—the only one of her acquaintance who claims the woman is an impostor. *Poison in the Pen* (1957) deals with a vicious village letter-writer—anonymous, of course—whose bitter hatred turns to murder. *The Ivory Dagger* (1950) opens when a sadistic millionaire is murdered with his own prized artifact.

Wentworth always introduces a large cast of characters, several red herrings, and a scattering of strong motives, while lacing the brew with dashes of danger, and youthful romance. Her plots are solid, and usually set among a close-knit group of friends and family, making these novels some of the best examples of the British country-house murder mystery.

Over it all, the old fashioned and sensible Miss Maud Silver presides, giving the books a cosy feeling that all's right with the world. Even in the later

novels, folks still go to the seashore for their health, and an "affair" refers to a romantic, often nonphysical, relationship. There is good in the world, and there is evil. "In the upshot, virtue had been vindicated, crime exposed, and justice done in the manner of the Victorian tract." Just as this was true of *Poison in the Pen*, it is equally true of all of Miss Silver's many cases.

(Six of Maud Silver's cases are available in Bantam paperback editions, at \$2.25 each.)

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## MYSTERY REVIEWS

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Jessica Mann has created a novel heroine in Tamara Hoyland, archaeologist and British civil servant, recruited into an unnamed British spy ring after the bombing murder of her fiancé. Not only is that unusual, but Tamara's assignment is to investigate her dead lover's hometown, a craggy, lonely island called Forway off the coasts of Cornwall and Ireland. Forway is the **No Man's Island** of the title, and soon it's obvious that there is indeed trouble brewing there. Tamara's involvement is told in the third person, but half the book is narrated by Magnus Paull, a likable writer and scholar, son of the town's leader. While Tamara is staunchly trying to sort out motives from misunderstandings, and murders from mishaps, Magnus mainly has his mind on romance. This is catchy and unusual, and very entertaining. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 178 pp.)

Raymond Paul reprises the charismatic Irish lawyer Lon Quincannon in his second "Historical Novel of Murder." **The Tragedy at Tiverton**, like *The Thomas Street Horror*, is based on a true case, and this one's a plum. On a December day in 1832, Sarah Maria Cornell's body is found hanged from a fencepost. The initial ruling is suicide, but a note is discovered among the dead girl's belongings that points a finger at a well-known Methodist minister, the Reverend Ephraim Avery. Quincannon and his young legal

colleague Christopher Randolph (who narrates the tale) agree to take up Avery's defense. This is a ripping tale of murder, lust, and revenge, filled with authentic period detail and peopled by some great characters. There's a wonderful scam perpetrated on the people of Manhattan, and a wild and woolly rescue of Christy's fiancée from the hands of a notorious abortionist, to name but two of the subplots. But the historical case itself—replete with religious fervor, harsh social mores, and telling scenes of New England's laws and justice—could stand alone, even without the charming young Christy and the mysterious and attractive Quincannon. For those of you who appreciate something different, I heartily recommend this one. (Viking Press, \$13.95, 372 pp.)

Sergeant Norah Mulcahane of the New York City police force is back in **Cop Without a Shield**, by Lillian O'Donnell (G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$13.95, 233 pp.), although it looks as if this may be her last case. A tragic personal loss drives Norah to resign from the force and flee to a friend's empty farmhouse in scenic York County, Pennsylvania. But Norah's sense of civic duty is strong, and when the body of a beautiful murdered girl is discovered in the snow, her training as a police officer takes over. Acting without police authority and without the gun she's used to carrying, Norah is particularly vulnerable to the dangers in this case. She also learns a bitter lesson: that corruption can exist in a small town as readily as it does in the big city.

Robert B. Parker's fans grow with each new book, and **A Savage Place** (Dell, \$2.95, 184 pp.) makes the reasons clear. Parker's private eye and narrator, Spenser, has all the sass, smarts and strength that readers of the hardboiled detective story have grown to love. Spenser's usual base is Boston, but this time he goes on assignment to L.A. to protect his client. She is Candy Sloan, a beautiful TV news reporter, who is being harrassed for her investigation of labor racketeering in the film business. Spenser's an acute observer with a keen sense of humor, and his portrait of Hollywood is not to be missed. But this is also a tough and gritty tale of big-time greed and small-time vanities, a landscape involved in tarnished "Oscars" and empty dreams, and although all readers will agree that Spenser loses this battle, not everyone might support his macho notion of how to win the war.



Jean-Louis Trintignant takes a back seat to his secretary, Fanny Ardant, as they set out to establish his innocence.

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# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



**M**ost nostalgia movies try to come off either as spoofs or as deeply profound and symbolic reworkings of old forms. In contrast, **Confidentially Yours** just tries to be a good, old fashioned movie. Shot in black and white, this romantic comedy-mystery by the Hitchcock-worshipping French director Francois Truffaut successfully combines the brooding American *film noir* pictorial style of the 1940's with the light, comic touch of the William Powell-Myrna Loy *Thin Man* series.

The owner of a one-man travel agency appears to have killed both his wife and her lover. On the run from the police, he can't move about freely enough to clear himself and so has to let his adoring secretary do most of the legwork. She can't be sure he's not guilty, but as the corpses and the evidence against him pile up, she finds reasons

to believe in his innocence.

There are plenty of motifs copied out of old movies here: dark, sinister streets; a gangland nightclub; scenes shot in the rain; anachronistically old typewriters in modern offices; and even a familiar revolving false wall of books. But more important than the strewing about of these items for the benefit of old-movie buffs is the originality of the relationship between the boss (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and his secretary (the spunky, tall, gratifyingly non-glamorous Fanny Ardant). The two of them disagree on strategy, squabble over details, and keep reminding one another of past mistakes.

The effect is something like the marital intimacy between Nick and Nora Charles in *The Thin Man*, except that the champagne-filled high life is replaced by an Inspector Maigret-like middle class domestic-

ity. Both on television and in the movies, the old fashioned mystery seems to be making a welcome comeback.

In 1903 Ernest Childers, a former British soldier and government employee, published what is probably the first novel of international intrigue: *The Riddle of the Sands*. Based on his sailing experiences in the North Sea, it dealt with the possibility that Germany could mount an amphibious invasion of England by striking across this body of water at the undefended northeast coast. The British public was stunned, and the government quickly built three naval stations in the region whose vulnerability Childers had pointed out.

Now a British movie of **The Riddle of the Sands** has faithfully traced the adventure of Childers' two Oxford graduates who stumble on a German invasion plot while on a holiday sail along the German coast. The "riddle" that faces them is hardly difficult to unravel, but the step by step uncovering of its details is fascinating. So, too, is the way in which the period settings, along with the slightly stiff carriage of the actors, enable the viewer to regard the idea of a German attack with the same innocent shock it must have carried in 1903.

The two young Englishmen

obviously represent the two sides of Ernest Childers himself: the foreign office clerk (played by Michael York as a supercilious dandy who turns out to have a plucky side), and the resourceful expert sailor (played in the best style of unassuming British heroism by Simon MacCorkindale). There are also a beautiful young girl, her villainous father, and assorted sinister German officials. All have exquisite manners that render their skullduggery a pleasure to witness.

The atmosphere is of boys' adventure tales such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*. As a result one has to be tolerant of some rather childish heroics by the young men. But the two of them are so engaging, and the photography so beautiful, that one easily makes allowance for the juvenility.

**Scandalous** makes broad comedy out of a father (John Gielgud) and daughter (Pamela Stephenson) confidence team that gets caught up in a mystery when they try to put one over on a popular young TV newsman (Robert Hays). The movie tries so hard for laughs that there's hardly a hint that we should be paying attention to the clues. But in fact they all fit nicely into place in the surprisingly well worked out plot.



# THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Jack Kavanagh of North Kingstown, Rhode Island. Honorable mentions go to Jean Van Etten of Indianapolis, Indiana; Elizabeth Doyle of Tres Pinos, California; Cynthia Broadwater of Tampa, Florida; Alan N. Tremba of Barnesboro, Pennsylvania; Mary Ann Hanada of Portland, Oregon; Hendrica Kovacs of Toronto, Canada; Mary Kirnberger of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Rose P. Lee of Bolingbrook, Illinois; Stephen Philip Oakes of Burnaby, B.C., Canada; Kim E. Nay, Sr., of Noorvik, Alaska; K. J. Franks of Wooster, Ohio; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Mike Dougan of Woodland Hills, California; and B. Newton of Saline, Michigan.

## A VIOLIN END by Jack Kavanagh

The two men had worked their way carefully down a trail more suitable for travel by goats than the frock coated pair who had come out from London, in thin hope, to find a clue to a tragic disappearance.

Dr. Watson and Mycroft Holmes gazed at the foreboding heights of Reichenbach Falls.

"To plummet from that cliff to these crags, locked in a death's embrace with that fiend, Moriarty, leaves no room to hope your brother has survived," said Dr. Watson.

"Not so, my dear Watson," was the reply. "Look here, my brother has left us a most reassuring message."

Mycroft Holmes pointed to the violin, readily recognizable as the one on which the great detective played so often when thinking out the problems of difficult cases. It was battered, the strings were gone, and it was stained with gore as though used as a weapon in a desperate battle.

Watson shuddered. "You say there's a message from Holmes in this? How can you find such a sight reassuring?"

"Elementary, my dear Watson. My brother wishes us to know that, like his violin, from which he has removed the strings, he is bloody, but unbowed."

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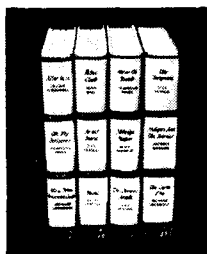
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